Building Quality from the Ground Up: A Systemic Approach to Online Degree Programs

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September 24, 2025

RECOMMENDED ACTION PLAN

- Implement systematic program-level alignment that connects institutional mission to individual learning activities, ensuring coherent student experiences across all courses.
- Establish collaborative design teams integrating faculty, instructional designers, and student support professionals to create sustainable, equity-centered online programs.
- Embed continuous quality assurance processes that use real-time data and student feedback to drive iterative improvements in curriculum, teaching support, and learner success.

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Introduction

It is the start of a new term, and an online degree program you have spent months refining is about to launch. Faculty are confident—not because they have memorized the Learning Management System's (LMS) quirks, but because they have been supported through targeted training, collaborative design sessions, and clear guidance on fostering online presence. Students log in to find courses that flow seamlessly from one to the next, each building toward program-level competencies and connected to real-world applications. Behind the scenes, advising, technical support, and library services are not afterthoughts—they are embedded into the learning environment, ready to address challenges before they become barriers. Data dashboards update in real time, providing insight into engagement and achievement. This happens when curriculum, faculty development, learner support, and continuous quality assurance operate as an intentionally integrated system—designed not just for launch, but for sustained engagement, equity, and excellence across the learner journey.

Holistic online program design, in this sense, means aligning every element—curriculum, instructional practice, support services, and quality assurance—around a shared vision of student success. While online education's modularity, scalability, and convenience offer clear advantages, the same features can fragment the student experience when programs grow without cohesive oversight. The rapid expansion of online degree programs (ODPs)—now serving over 4.9 million U.S. students, or 26% of the total student population (Ortagus et al., 2024)—has intensified the need for intentional, program-level strategies that preserve academic rigor, ensure consistency, and maintain a sense of community in the absence of a physical campus.

Research underscores that success in ODPs is shaped as much by systemic design as by individual course quality. Shepherd and Bolliger (2023) emphasize integrating curriculum, community-building, and quality assurance at the program level. Joshi (2022) cautions that without alignment of outcomes, learner support, and faculty development, rapid growth risks producing inequitable and inconsistent experiences. An Online Master of Business Administration (MBA) program has embedded a Responsible Leadership theme across all courses, paired with program-level Quality Matters (QM) certification to ensure coherence and rigor (Grincewicz et al., 2023). The result is a curriculum that threads sustainability, ethics, and global competencies throughout the program while maintaining measurable quality standards.

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Sustainable quality in online education is not measured by enrollment numbers alone, but by long-term outcomes: mastery of program learning objectives, career readiness, and graduates' capacity to adapt and lead in complex environments (Grincewicz et al., 2022, 2023; Grincewicz & Simunich, 2024). The Online MBA example illustrates how intentionally closing the loop between feedback, design, and learner support fosters a "Students First" culture, aligning academic rigor with real-world relevance through initiatives like the Responsible Leadership Initiative and integration of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Grincewicz et al., 2023).

Yet many institutions still treat online program design as a sequence of isolated course builds rather than a unified learner experience. Without a shared vision and program-level alignment, students navigate a patchwork of styles, structures, and expectations—undermining retention, skill scaffolding, and program identity. In competitive online markets, where reputation alone no longer guarantees enrollment, demonstrable quality becomes a strategic differentiator.

The future of ODPs will be defined not by the speed of their expansion but by the depth of their design. Institutions that weave together cohesive curricula, well-prepared faculty, responsive learner support, and continuous quality assurance create more than courses—they build enduring learning ecosystems. In a crowded and competitive landscape, the most sustainable advantage will belong to programs that view quality as a living practice, aligning every element of design and delivery to the long-term success of their students, their institutions, and the communities they serve.

This white paper responds to that challenge by synthesizing current research and practice-based insights into a model for high-quality ODPs grounded in **four integrated areas:**

- Program Design
- Teaching Support
- Learner Support
- Learner Success

These four pillars align with established quality frameworks in higher education and reflect the core components of the QM Program Certifications. These pillars work together in three essential ways: (1) they create **systematic alignment** from institutional mission to individual learning activities, (2) they ensure **sustained support** for both faculty and students throughout the program lifecycle, and (3) they establish **feedback loops** that enable continuous improvement based on evidence rather than assumptions.

Each pillar is essential, but the pillars' interdependence defines holistic design. A program with excellent learner support but inconsistent instruction, or one with rigorous course content but no scaffolding for community or career application, will ultimately fall short of its potential.

While these four pillars provide a practical framework for action, they gain power when grounded in research-based theory. Understanding why holistic design works—not just how to implement it—enables institutions to adapt principles to their unique contexts and sustain quality improvements over time.

HOLISTIC ONLINE DEGREE PROGRAM QUALITY FRAMEWORK

This white paper synthesizes current research and practice-based insights into a model for high-quality ODPs, grounded in four interconnected areas: Program Design, Teaching Support, Learner Support, and Learner Success. These pillars will be explored in detail, illustrating how they align with established quality frameworks and contribute to the overall student experience. By linking theory to actionable strategies, the discussion shows how institutions can move beyond compliance toward a culture of continuous improvement, ensuring that quality is not a one-time achievement but an enduring characteristic of their online programs.

Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks for Understanding Online Program Quality

A holistic approach to online program design is most effective when grounded in robust theoretical and conceptual frameworks. These frameworks help institutions move beyond ad hoc decisions toward strategic, research-informed practice. They provide a shared language for evaluating success at multiple levels—learner, instructor, program, and institution—ensuring all stakeholders operate from a common understanding of quality.

This white paper draws on two central frameworks—Institutional Theory and Tinto's Theory of Student Retention—to illuminate how strategic coherence and human-centered design can be integrated in high-quality online degree programs. Real-world application is demonstrated through an Online MBA program, where a unifying theme of *Responsible Management*—aligned with the United Nations SDGs—was woven through curriculum, faculty development, and student engagement to achieve QM Program Design certification (Grincewicz et al., 2023).

Institutional Theory and Strategic Alignment

Institutional Theory explains how organizations—including colleges and universities—adopt new structures and behaviors in response to external pressures such as accreditation standards, market competition, and technological innovation (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). In the current higher education landscape, online delivery is no longer optional but central to institutional strategy and sustainability (Chakraborty, 2024). Research underscores this shift: implementing quality online programs is increasingly recognized as an organizational change priority requiring leadership, strategic planning, and resources (Carter et al., 2020; Grincewicz et al., 2022; Ortagus et al., 2023, 2024; Rojas, 2020). Integrating distance learning into institutional strategic plans is essential for creating a shared vision that aligns mission, operations, and long-term sustainability (Carter et al., 2020; Ortagus et al., 2023, 2024). The rapid growth of online learning and heightened competition have created a demand for administrators with specialized expertise in online pedagogy, technology, and student support—framing online programs as competitive necessities rather than discretionary offerings.

Findings from the Changing Landscape of Online Education (CHLOE) survey reinforce this reality. Most chief online learning officers report that online education is now explicitly embedded in institutional strategic plans, often serving as a driver of enrollment growth and a hedge against declining on-campus enrollment (Simunich et al., 2025). CHLOE also highlights that online programs are increasingly tied to financial sustainability, providing new revenue streams, expanding geographic reach, and meeting the needs of adult and nontraditional learners. At the same time, intensifying competition for online students is prompting greater institutional investment in marketing, program differentiation, and robust support infrastructure—further solidifying online delivery as a core element of institutional planning and survival.

However, the legitimacy of online degrees still depends on how convincingly institutions can demonstrate quality, coherence, and student-centeredness. In this context, **quality assurance becomes more than a compliance requirement—it becomes a strategic tool.** Joshi (2022) argues that institutions must adopt digitally competent organizational structures, where online program development is integrated with mission, planning, and resourcing.

The Online MBA example (Grincewicz et al., 2022, 2023; Grincewicz & Simunich, 2024) demonstrates how strategic alignment can turn these pressures into opportunities. Guided by QM Standards, program leaders integrated the Responsible Management theme into program learning outcomes, course design, and faculty onboarding. The alignment process connected SDG-focused learning activities with institutional mission statements and

accreditation standards, ensuring that each course met design quality benchmarks and reinforced the program's unique market position.

Strategic alignment between online program initiatives and institutional goals strengthens an institution's ability to navigate future challenges and sustain competitive relevance (Grincewicz et al., 2022). Strategic alignment strengthens institutions through four key mechanisms: (1) **coherent resource allocation** that supports quality initiatives, (2) **clear accountability structures** that define roles and expectations, (3) **competitive differentiation** in an increasingly crowded market, and (4) **stakeholder confidence** among students, employers, and accreditors.

Tinto's Theory of Retention and the Importance of Integration

At the student level, Tinto's Theory of Student Retention (1993) provides a powerful lens for understanding persistence in online degree programs, where students often face challenges such as isolation, limited peer interaction, and reduced engagement with instructors. According to Tinto, students are more likely to stay enrolled and succeed when they experience both **academic integration** (a sense of progress and intellectual engagement) and **social integration** (a sense of belonging and connection to peers, faculty, and the institution).

In fully online programs, where casual socialization is limited and the risk of isolation is high, institutions must work intentionally to foster these forms of integration. Shepherd and Bolliger's (2023) Institutional–Program–Professional (IPP) Community Framework extends Tinto's work by adding a more nuanced, online-specific perspective. The IPP model identifies three overlapping layers of community:

- **Institutional** – accessible student services, inclusive policies, and campus-wide support networks
- **Programmatic** – program identity-building, cohort pathways, and shared milestones
- **Professional** – career-aligned experiences, mentorship, and networking opportunities

In the Online MBA case (Grincewicz et al., 2023), Programmatic and Professional integration were achieved through cross-course projects in which students applied SDG principles to authentic business challenges. For example, in the Global Technology Strategy course, students collaborated in virtual teams to analyze how digital transformation can reduce carbon footprints (SDG #13, Climate Action) while creating economic opportunities (SDG #8, Decent Work and Economic Growth). These projects built professional networks while reinforcing the program's central theme.

Learners who feel seen, supported, and connected are more likely to persist because they are satisfied and experience their education as meaningful and applicable to their personal and professional goals. These needs are particularly pronounced for adult and nontraditional learners, who often juggle competing responsibilities and may bring prior experiences of educational marginalization (Krsmanovic & Foster, 2025). The Online MBA example shows that integrating frameworks like Tinto's model and the IPP framework with program-wide themes can foster retention by embedding belonging and relevance into every stage of the learner journey: responsibilities and prior experiences of educational marginalization (Krsmanovic & Foster, 2025).

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Bridging the Frameworks: From Strategic Design to Human-Centered Experience

Institutional Theory (Meyer & Rowan, 1977) and Tinto's Retention Model (1993) highlight the dual mandate of quality online programs: they must be **strategically coherent and human-centered**. Strategic coherence ensures that learning outcomes, faculty development, course templates, and evaluation systems are aligned, yet achieving this is challenging due to resource constraints, institutional silos, and gaps in faculty preparation for online pedagogy.

These theoretical insights translate into practical imperatives: if institutional legitimacy depends on demonstrating quality, and student success requires academic and social integration, then online program design must be systematic rather than piecemeal. By combining strategic alignment with intentional community-building, programs can sustain quality, foster engagement, and differentiate themselves in an increasingly competitive online education market.

Program Design: A Systems View

Designing a successful ODP begins well before the first course is launched. At its core, ODP design demands a **systems-level perspective** that sees curriculum not as a sequence of isolated courses but as a coherent, cumulative journey of academic development, skill-building, and identity formation. It requires a programmatic lens emphasizing curricular coherence, measurable outcomes, and alignment across all design layers—from institutional goals to individual learning activities. High-quality ODPs view **curriculum as a system, not a sequence,** ensuring that learners experience logical progression, academic rigor, and cumulative skill development throughout their journey.

This systems-oriented approach demands alignment at every layer—from institutional strategy to course content, pedagogy to student support. Such alignment ensures that program-level competencies and professional standards are embedded in every learning activity and reflected in students' interactions with faculty and support staff, creating a coherent and cumulative learning experience. This scaffolding supports knowledge acquisition and transforming learners into capable professionals and critical thinkers (Bryan et al., 2021; Shepherd & Bolliger, 2023). As Joshi (2022) emphasizes, such alignment must extend beyond instructional content to encompass the technical, organizational, and relational infrastructure that sustains learner engagement across time.

Alignment as the Structural Backbone

In a systems-oriented design, alignment is the structural backbone that gives a program its integrity. Without it, course design risks becoming fragmented, leaving learners unsure of how individual activities contribute to their professional preparation. When course-level outcomes are explicitly mapped to program competencies, learners see a clear throughline: how early foundational skills in research, communication, or quantitative reasoning evolve into more advanced applications in capstone projects, fieldwork, or applied case studies (Bryan et al., 2021).

Alignment tools—such as curriculum maps, outcome matrices, and assessment blueprints—make these connections explicit and measurable. They also give faculty a reference for evaluating whether assessments are pitched at the right difficulty level, whether content overlaps or leaves gaps, and whether program outcomes remain current with industry needs. However, as Joshi (2022) notes, tools alone do not create coherence. They must be embedded in a collaborative culture that values reflection, iteration, and interdisciplinary input, or they risk becoming static compliance documents.

Effective curriculum mapping requires three critical components:

- Transparent learning progressions showing how skills build across courses, so students understand the purpose and sequence of their work.
- Authentic assessment milestones that demonstrate applied competency and bridge academic learning with real-world performance expectations.
- Regular revision cycles that respond to student feedback, accreditation changes, and shifts in workforce demands.

The Midwest RN-to-BSN program described by Bryan et al. (2021) exemplifies this approach. By aligning 95% of course- and program-level outcomes, embedding consistent navigation and accessibility standards, and developing detailed curriculum maps, the program achieved QM Program Design certification. Programs that embed QM Standards into their design culture benefit from shared language, common expectations, and a structure for continuous improvement (Bryan et al., 2021; Grincewicz et al., 2022).

From One-Time Build to Continuous Improvement

A systems view rejects the "build once" mentality. Instead, it treats curriculum as a living system that evolves through cycles of stakeholder feedback, iterative testing, and longitudinal assessment of learner success (Bryan et al., 2021). This approach mirrors continuous improvement processes in industry, where products are refined over time to meet changing needs.

Baker and Tukhvatulina (2023) found that adult learners in asynchronous programs experienced frustration when navigation, assessment formats, and feedback practices varied between courses. These inconsistencies increased cognitive load, diverted attention from content, and eroded learner confidence. High-quality programs address this using structured course templates and shell designs that establish predictable navigation, accessible media, and logically sequenced materials across all courses (Baker & Tukhvatulina, 2023; Bryan et al., 2021).

Some institutions, for example, use "master shells" in their LMS that preload consistent menu structures, support links, and accessibility features (Grincewicz & Simunich, 2021). This standardization frees faculty to focus on content and pedagogy rather than technical setup, giving students a stable interface from term to term. This stability is especially critical in accelerated programs, where a single misstep can cost valuable learning time.

Strategic Coherence as a Quality Safeguard

While alignment ensures that courses fit together and iteration refines them over time, strategic coherence provides the unifying compass that keeps the entire program moving toward a clearly defined vision. It connects daily design decisions to long-term program goals, ensuring that every course, activity, and support service reinforces the same overarching direction. Without this guiding thread, even high-quality individual courses may fail to create a coherent learner experience. This is especially important for non-traditional learners balancing work, caregiving, and other life responsibilities alongside their studies. Watson et al. (2024) emphasize that retaining such students requires intentional flexibility in program structures, pacing, and engagement models to avoid replicating rigid traditions that inadvertently exclude them. Joshi (2022) cautioned that rapid program expansion without such alignment can lead to design inconsistencies, equity gaps, and accreditation risks—especially when speed-to-market is prioritized over a shared vision.

An Online MBA Program provides a decisive counterexample. As the program expanded, leadership implemented a unifying theme that anchored course design, faculty collaboration, and assessment in a shared vision. Whether students were studying economics, leadership, or technology, they encountered recurring concepts, shared case studies, and aligned assessment frameworks, reinforcing the same overarching outcomes (Grincewicz et al., 2023). This strengthened curricular coherence and aligned with external quality frameworks, creating a sustainable growth and continuous improvement roadmap.

Strategic coherence also strengthens a program's brand identity by ensuring that students, employers, and accreditors encounter a consistent and distinctive message about the program's purpose. It enables all stakeholders to recognize—and see evidence of—what a graduate knows, can do, and values, creating a shared understanding that extends beyond marketing to lived outcomes.

Designing for Coherence Through Collaborative Expertise

Fragmentation often emerges when program design is siloed between content developers, faculty, and support staff (Grincewicz et al., 2022; Joshi & Kantola, 2022). Students in such programs may encounter multiple navigation styles, inconsistent grading rubrics, and disconnected learner support, forcing them to spend valuable time decoding expectations instead of engaging deeply with the material. As Baker and Tukhvatulina (2023) note, these inconsistencies can erode motivation and increase withdrawal rates, undermining learner persistence and program reputation.

A collaborative design model counteracts this by weaving together diverse areas of expertise from the beginning of program planning. When instructional designers, faculty, librarians, assessment leads, and other specialists work in concert, they can close gaps, eliminate redundancy, and create learning activities that meet academic standards and reflect student realities. This approach allows support to be embedded directly into the curriculum—such as linking writing center consultations to a capstone project or integrating library tutorials within a research assignment—so that guidance and resources are part of the learning process, not an optional add-on.

Sustained program quality depends on assembling teams that collectively bring four core dimensions to the table:

- Disciplinary knowledge from subject matter experts to ensure rigor and relevance.
- Pedagogical science from instructional designers to apply evidence-based teaching strategies.
- Learner experience insights from student success professionals to improve engagement and persistence.
- Technical feasibility and accessibility from IT staff to ensure usability, security, and compliance with accessibility standards.

This multi-expertise approach ensures that content and delivery meet high standards and that design decisions are sustainable at scale. In practice, such teams also improve faculty satisfaction by reducing the burden on any one individual and by creating a shared sense of ownership for the program's success. In an Online MBA program, such collaboration between faculty, instructional designers, support staff, and technology specialists streamlined course development, maintained consistent quality across sections, and reduced the workload on individual faculty members—while creating a shared sense of ownership for the program's success (Grincewicz et al., 2022, 2023).

When collaboration is intentional and sustained, the program moves from a patchwork of individual contributions to a cohesive, learner-centered whole—where quality is maintained and amplified through shared purpose and integrated expertise.

Principles for High-Quality Program Design

A systems view of program design is not just a method but a mindset and cultural commitment. Programs that embed QM Standards into their design culture benefit from shared language, common expectations, and a structured framework for continuous improvement (Grincewicz et al., 2022; Bryan et al., 2021). This culture sustains coherent decision-making even when faculty turnover, technology shifts, or market conditions change, enabling institutions to adapt while preserving quality.

However, even the most carefully engineered curriculum remains theoretical until faculty bring it to life through presence, facilitation, and pedagogical choices (Shepherd & Bolliger, 2023). A coherent curriculum can falter if instructors are unprepared for

online teaching, just as excellent faculty can struggle within poorly designed program structures. For this reason, program design and teaching support are interdependent pillars of quality. Design decisions shape teaching practice, and faculty expertise and presence determine how design functions in real time. Institutions that invest in both are best positioned to deliver sustainable, high-quality online programs that meet academic and professional goals.

A systems-level approach aligns curriculum, pedagogy, and support structures, ensuring that the program's architecture—built through strategic alignment, collaborative design, and embedded quality frameworks—translates into meaningful, engaging learning experiences. Ultimately, high-quality program design reflects three core principles:

- **Alignment** – Program, course, and assessment outcomes are intentionally mapped to each other and professional standards, creating a clear progression of skills and knowledge (Bryan et al., 2021; Shepherd & Bolliger, 2023; Joshi, 2022)
- **Coherence** – Courses contribute to a unified program vision, reinforcing shared themes, concepts, and competencies across disciplines (Grincewicz et al., 2023; Joshi, 2022)
- **Collaboration** – Design teams integrate disciplinary, pedagogical, learner experience, and technical expertise to ensure quality, relevance, and sustainability (Bryan et al., 2021; Joshi & Kantola, 2022; Grincewicz et al., 2022)

Program design establishes the structural backbone of an online degree, but structure alone is insufficient. Its integrity depends on skilled faculty who translate program goals into rich, student-centered experiences. The following section examines Teacher Support, highlighting how intentional faculty development, instructional partnerships, and sustained support systems ensure that the structural strengths established in program design are fully realized in day-to-day teaching and learner engagement.

Teaching Support: Capacity Building and Professional Learning

Faculty excellence creates the conditions for learning, but students also need infrastructure that supports their success beyond the virtual classroom. In fully online programs, where casual campus encounters do not exist, every support service—from advising to mental health resources—must be intentionally designed and seamlessly integrated into the learning experience.

Framing Teaching Support as Systemic, Not Supplemental

Delaney and Betts (2022) emphasized that high-performing online programs offer structured onboarding, mentoring, and ongoing professional learning and not optional or ad hoc workshops. Their study found that when instructional designers, administrators, and faculty worked together from the early stages of program planning, faculty were more confident and effective in applying online pedagogical strategies. This effectiveness is amplified when faculty development is grounded in a shared instructional philosophy and a culture of reflection, creating a common framework for decision-making and problem-solving across courses.

Systemic faculty support operates on three levels: (1) foundational training in online pedagogy, technology tools, and accessibility; (2) ongoing coaching through instructional partnerships, peer learning, and mentorship (Delaney & Betts, 2022; Rojas, 2020); and (3) advanced development in emerging practices such as inclusive design, learning analytics, and global collaboration. Strong instructional designer–faculty partnerships enhance the quality of course design and professional growth, equipping instructors to meet the pedagogical demands of fully online programs (Delaney & Betts, 2022; Joshi & Kantola, 2022).

In the RN-to-BSN program, collaborative design meetings gave faculty structured opportunities to refine navigation, integrate accessible multimedia, and align assessments to clinical learning outcomes, with each change supported by just-in-time guidance from instructional designers (Bryan et al., 2021). These efforts were reinforced by consistent expectations for communication, presence, and feedback, ensuring that students experienced a cohesive learning environment regardless of instructor (Bryan et al., 2021; Roseland & Saeger, 2023; Stephens & Coryell, 2021). In an Online MBA, sustained support included targeted workshops on embedding SDGs into assignments, facilitating global virtual teams, and leveraging analytics to enhance discussion board interactions—activities that reinforced faculty's ability to create engaging, mission-aligned learning environments (Grincewicz et al., 2022; 2023).

Initial Preparation and Ongoing Professional Development

Stephens and Coryell (2021), in their study of online adult learning environments, found that even experienced educators require sustained, structured development in teaching presence, digital feedback, and the facilitation of asynchronous discussions. Many faculty underestimated the time, planning, and adaptability needed to foster authentic engagement online—particularly when the goal extends beyond content delivery to building meaningful learning communities. Tiered professional development models—built on faculty's prior experience and progressing from foundational skills to advanced facilitation techniques—are especially effective in meeting this need (Bryan et al., 2021; Delaney & Betts, 2022; Stephens & Coryell, 2021).

Transitioning to online teaching often means renegotiating professional identity. Instructors accustomed to face-to-face rapport must intentionally develop new strategies to convey empathy, sustain motivation, and cultivate trust at a distance. This emotional labor—frequently invisible in formal evaluations—deserves institutional acknowledgment and ongoing support.

An illustrative case of this approach can be seen in the RN-to-BSN program, where faculty development began with individualized professional development plans that outlined each instructor's goals for completing the university-designed Online Teaching Pathway certification. This optional—but widely encouraged—program functioned as a tiered pathway, beginning with compliance-based skills (e.g., ADA standards), advancing to quality-focused practices (e.g., QM alignment), and culminating in peer-led learning communities. By scaffolding growth in this way, the program ensured faculty were both technically proficient and pedagogically prepared for online delivery (Bryan et al., 2021).

Effective scaffolding for faculty goes beyond technical skills. Institutions can help instructors move from compliance-driven delivery to transformative facilitation by pairing instructional clarity with emotional presence. This might include mentoring on tone-setting in discussion forums, role-playing challenging feedback scenarios in virtual contexts, or co-developing multimedia welcome messages that humanize the course. When combined with continuous feedback loops, tiered development helps faculty adapt confidently and sustain an engaging presence across the semester.

Instructional Designer–Faculty Partnerships

Instructional designer–faculty partnerships are a cornerstone of sustainable teaching support in online programs. Collaborative design models that honor faculty expertise and design science create the conditions for these partnerships to thrive (Grincewicz et al., 2022; Joshi & Kantola, 2022). As Grincewicz et al. (2022) argue, sustained program improvement requires faculty to see themselves as content experts and co-designers of transformative learning experiences. This shift is particularly significant in online contexts, where presence, pacing, and feedback structures must be intentional and adaptive.

Joshi and Kantola (2022) found that when faculty co-designed courses with trained instructional designers, they could translate face-to-face learning

into the online modality without losing depth or academic rigor. Through these collaborations, faculty learned how to scaffold learning experiences for asynchronous delivery, integrate multimedia to enhance engagement, and design assessments that promoted sustained interaction rather than one-off submissions. Designers, in turn, gained insight into disciplinary norms and content-specific challenges, enabling them to create more tailored, discipline-aware course designs.

Grincewicz et al. (2022) emphasized that embedding instructional design expertise from the outset—rather than treating it as a late-stage add-on—resulted in better learning environments and greater faculty buy-in. Successful faculty-designer collaborations typically evolve through four stages: (1) **initial skepticism,** where faculty question the need for design support, (2) **structured cooperation** following established templates and processes, (3) **creative partnership** where both parties contribute innovative solutions, and (4) **independent application** where faculty internalize design principles.

An illustrative case of faculty-designer collaboration can be found in the Online MBA program, where collaboration began well before course launch. Instructional designers facilitated curriculum mapping sessions to align module activities and assessments with program-level competencies and accreditation requirements (Grincewicz et al., 2022). These early design meetings helped standardize navigation, ensure accessibility compliance, and embed QM Standards across all core courses. As development progressed, creative partnerships emerged—faculty worked with designers to integrate simulations, global teamwork projects, and case studies that connected course concepts to contemporary business challenges. The Responsible Leadership Initiative further shaped many of these activities, which anchored course projects in the United Nations SDGs to reinforce the program's mission and differentiate it in a competitive market (Grincewicz et al., 2023). When faculty reached the independent application stage, they could design and revise courses with minimal guidance. However, every revision underwent instructional designer review to maintain program-wide alignment, accessibility, and pedagogical quality.

Addressing Resistance and Building Engagement

Rojas (2020) examined an often-overlooked dimension of faculty support: the distinction between resistance and reluctance. In many cases, skepticism toward online programs is not rooted in opposition but in inadequate preparation, lack of recognition, or insufficient time to adapt courses. Faculty engagement can become fragmented and inconsistent when institutions fail to provide clear expectations, sustained development opportunities, or professional incentives. Conversely, programs that provide stipends, release time, public recognition, and transparent evaluation processes foster a culture of shared responsibility and pride in online instruction (Delaney & Betts, 2022; Rojas, 2020).

Teaching support must also evolve beyond onboarding to address the needs of mid-career faculty. Targeted workshops on emerging trends—such as AI integration in course design, DEI-informed feedback strategies, or adaptive courseware—help instructors remain confident, current, and responsive to student needs (Stephens & Coryell, 2021). Without this renewal, even committed faculty can stagnate, creating an instructional gap between the potential of the program's design and the lived realities of teaching practice.

Practice case – An Online MBA: When the OMBA launched, some faculty expressed reluctance to transition their courses online, citing concerns about workload, loss of instructional quality, and unfamiliarity with digital teaching methods. Program leadership and instructional designers addressed these concerns by offering release time for course redesign, stipends for participating in professional development, and co-design sessions that ensured faculty retained disciplinary autonomy while gaining technical and pedagogical support. Early adopters were spotlighted in faculty meetings and invited to share specific instructional strategies that improved online student engagement. Over time, these measures shifted perceptions, reduced skepticism, and built a culture where participating in ongoing development was viewed as a professional asset rather than an obligation (Grincewicz et al., 2022, 2023).

Continuous, Multi-Source Feedback

Instructor improvement is most sustainable when supported by continuous, multi-source feedback systematically built into program operations rather than treated as an end-of-term formality. Feedback loops are most effective when planned as part of the teaching support infrastructure, occur at multiple points in the teaching cycle, and use findings to guide timely, actionable changes in instructional practice.

In the RN-to-BSN program described by Bryan et al. (2021), faculty development and course improvement were structured using the Human Performance Technology (HPT) model, which parallels the nursing process and emphasizes evaluation at four levels:

- Formative evaluation during course design and early QM Peer Reviews, focusing on navigation clarity, standardization, and tools for engagement before courses are launched. Faculty training sessions and seminar feedback informed revisions before final approval.
- Summative evaluation at the point of QM course or program submission, including analysis of peer review findings and student course evaluations to assess immediate reactions and perceived learning gains.
- Confirmative evaluation to determine the long-term value and sustainability of QM-aligned design, including 3–5-year review cycles, student and faculty surveys, and analysis of retention, progression, and graduation data.
- Meta-evaluation integrating findings from all stages, supplemented by stakeholder reflections from students, faculty, administrators, and community partners to identify what is working, what is not, and where further development is needed.

By embedding this structured, cyclical process into teaching support, the program ensured that faculty received feedback at multiple points—before, during, and long after a course ran—and was directly linked to professional development and course design decisions. Leadership's commitment to using the HPT model reinforced a culture of evidence-based teaching improvement, positioning feedback as a collaborative tool for growth rather than a compliance requirement.

Principles for High-Quality Teaching Support

In holistic ODPs, teaching support is not an add-on—it is an intentional design principle that runs parallel to curriculum planning, learner services, and quality assurance. The most effective programs embed professional learning, collaborative partnerships, and continuous feedback into the program's operational fabric from the outset, ensuring that faculty are prepared to teach online and empowered to innovate, adapt, and lead.

Case studies such as the RN-to-BSN and Online MBA programs illustrate that when institutions align faculty development with a clear instructional philosophy, measurable program outcomes, and sustained designer–faculty collaboration, the result is more than technical competence—instructional excellence. Instructors move beyond content delivery to become co-creators of dynamic, equitable learning environments that reflect institutional values and meet the evolving needs of diverse learners. This approach honors the complexity and creativity inherent in online teaching while positioning faculty as integral partners in maintaining and advancing program quality. Supported as designers, facilitators, and quality stewards, faculty can make evidence-based pedagogical choices that foster immediate learner engagement and long-term success.

Ultimately, high-quality teaching support reflects three core principles:

- **Systemic Integration** – Professional learning is embedded into program planning from the outset, operating in parallel with curriculum design, learner support, and quality assurance (Bryan et al., 2021; Delaney & Betts, 2022; Grincewicz et al., 2022)
- **Collaborative Partnerships** – Instructional designers, faculty, and support staff co-design courses, blending disciplinary expertise with pedagogical, technical, and accessibility best practices (Grincewicz et al., 2022; Joshi & Kantola, 2022)
- **Continuous Feedback** – Multi-source evaluations before, during, and after course delivery guide iterative improvement, fostering evidence-based instructional decision-making (Bryan et al., 2021; Rojas, 2022)

Teaching support establishes the capacity for instructional excellence, but capacity alone is insufficient. Faculty thrive when institutions recognize their creative, relational, and technical contributions, provide resources for ongoing innovation, and cultivate a culture where teaching excellence is a shared, celebrated responsibility. Programs that embed these supports sustain quality over time and strengthen the relational and instructional depth needed for high-impact, mission-aligned learning experiences. Equally essential to maintaining quality is ensuring that students have the resources, guidance, and community they need to succeed—making learner support the next critical pillar in a holistic program design.

Learner Support: Designing for Belonging and Success

Adequate learner support is not an ancillary feature of ODPs; it is a foundational design element that shapes student engagement, satisfaction, persistence, and long-term success, including retention and graduation rates. Support must be proactively embedded across the learner journey in fully online environments, where students often navigate coursework without the incidental contact of a physical campus. A holistic approach views support as a **design system, not a set of reactive services.** In a study of fully online EdD students, Pham et al. (2022) found that learners valued environments that acknowledged their individuality, provided flexibility, and offered multiple modes of interaction, such as text, video, and asynchronous forums, alongside proactive technological guidance. This reinforces that support design must be intentional in both content and delivery.

Three Key Touchpoints for Effective Support Integration

Effective support integration requires attention to three key touchpoints:

1. **Course-embedded resources** students encounter during learning activities reduce the need to search outside the course. For example, an online MBA program embeds writing center consultations, discipline-specific library guides, and automated citation tools into weekly modules so students can access them without leaving the course space (Grincewicz et al., 2022). This "just-in-time" approach makes support contextual, immediate, and relevant, echoing Baker and Tukhvatulina's (2023) finding that students value clarity and direct access to tools during coursework.

2. **Proactive outreach systems** that identify and address barriers before they become crises are increasingly recognized as a cornerstone of online learner support. Advisors and faculty can use LMS analytics to flag students who have not logged in for several days or missed multiple discussion posts, then reach out with a personalized message and targeted resources. Research shows that such outreach can be embedded into program design to improve retention and engagement by combining milestone-based contact, motivational messaging, and targeted resource referrals (Akers, 2021; Rotar, 2022). Studies on early alert systems further highlight that while timely notifications can prompt students to take action, outreach efforts should be framed constructively to avoid unintended negative emotions (Imundo et al., 2025). This aligns with the ethical imperative, noted by Ortagus et al. (2023), to actively support online learners—particularly those for whom online education may be the only viable pathway to degree completion.

3. **Seamless referral networks** that connect students to appropriate services without bureaucratic obstacles. For example, a student struggling with time management might mention this in an advising session; the advisor could, in the same conversation, schedule them for a workshop with the academic skills center and send confirmation—no additional forms or repeated explanations required (Bailey et al., 2015).

Together, these touchpoints form a **cohesive support ecosystem**—embedded in course design, powered by proactive engagement, and reinforced by smooth service connections—that addresses common online learner pain points identified in the literature (Baker & Tukhvatulina, 2023; Ortagus et al., 2023). When executed well, they move support from a reactive safety net to a proactive, visible, and strategic component of the learner experience.

Support as a Driver of Digital Student Experience

Services such as academic advising, mental health counseling, library resources, and accessibility support only serve their purpose when they are easy to find, timely, and aligned with course demands. When support is integrated into course navigation and directly tied to learning activities, it moves from optional to essential.

This aligns with Joshi's (2022) argument that institutions must design for the digital student experience, ensuring that tools, people, and processes converge to reduce friction and increase belonging. Baker and Tukhvatulina's (2023) study of adult learners in asynchronous degree programs reinforces this point. When support is siloed or difficult to locate, students report diminished connection to their institution and reduced confidence in their ability to persist. In contrast, embedding resources "just-in-time" within the LMS—such as linking tutoring to specific assignments, integrating library databases into research modules, or providing real-time advising chat during registration periods—positions support as a seamless extension of the learning process rather than an external, extra step.

Research further underscores that embedding support into the learning environment is most effective when paired with proactive outreach and milestone-based engagement. Akers (2021) describes how LMS analytics can identify students at risk of disengagement, prompting timely advisor interventions. Rotar (2022) emphasizes embedding support touchpoints—such as resource links, progress check-ins, and skill-building activities—within course flow to maintain momentum and build learner confidence. Imundo et al. (2025) highlight the potential of early alert systems to spur positive action when framed constructively, reducing the likelihood of negative emotional responses. Ortagus et al. (2023) position these practices as part of an ethical imperative for institutions to actively support online learners, particularly those with no alternative pathway to degree completion. Together, these findings point to an integrated model in which academic and personal support are not separate from coursework but are intentionally woven into the learner's day-to-day experience.

Designing for Belonging in Fully Online Programs

Belonging is particularly critical in online programs. Without regular interpersonal interactions, learners are at increased risk of isolation and disengagement—a risk heightened in fully online environments, where students often report "no or little sense of community" alongside inconsistent course design and communication barriers (Baker & Tukhvatulina, 2023). As discussed earlier, Shepherd and Bolliger's (2023) IPP Community Framework provides a lens for understanding how layered forms of support contribute to belonging in online degree programs. Their model underscores the interplay between institutional access to services, program-level identity, and professional relevance, with each layer requiring reinforcement through clear communication, authentic interaction, and structured opportunities for meaningful participation.

At the institutional level, belonging begins with consistent access to essential services—advising, library resources, accessibility support, mental health counseling, financial aid, and technical assistance—paired with clear pathways for use. These services foster belonging most effectively when integrated into the learning environment and communicated proactively through "one-stop" digital hubs and embedded course links. Stone and Springer (2019) found that when institutional efforts to improve online learning quality include accessible, clearly signposted support alongside engaging, inclusive, and interactive course design, students experience stronger connectedness and are more likely to persist. Proactive outreach systems strengthen belonging by identifying and addressing barriers before crises occur. Akers (2021) demonstrates how monitoring LMS

engagement allows advisors to intervene early with individualized support, while Rotar (2022) advocates embedding resource touchpoints and progress check-ins within course flow to sustain engagement. Imundo et al. (2025) caution that early alerts should be framed constructively to avoid negative emotional responses, and Ortagus et al. (2023) frame these practices as an ethical imperative for equity—ensuring that all learners, particularly those with limited alternatives for degree completion, receive visible and consistent signals of institutional care.

Program-level belonging emerges from a shared academic identity and thematic continuity across courses, reinforced through assignments, discussions, and applied projects that align with the program's central values and goals (Shepherd & Bolliger, 2023). Research shows that programs with consistent thematic framing, aligned assessments, and integrated co-curricular opportunities create a sense of cohort connection, even in asynchronous environments (Mauldin et al., 2022). This coherence helps students see themselves as part of a collective effort toward common goals, reinforcing persistence.

At the professional level, belonging grows when coursework connects to career pathways through networking, mentorship, and milestone-based opportunities to reflect on professional growth. These experiences deepen a student's professional identity and create bridges between their academic and career communities. Studies of online professional programs highlight the value of structured mentorship and industry engagement in fostering connection and relevance (Stone & Springer, 2019).

Across all layers, belonging depends on transparent communication, authentic interaction, and multiple avenues for participation (Shepherd & Bolliger, 2023), making it a designed feature of learner support rather than an incidental byproduct.

Aligning Support with Learner Goals and Identities

Adequate learner support also requires alignment with learners' goals, identities, and life contexts. In their study of a fully online EdD program, Krsmanovic and Foster (2025) found that support services had the greatest impact when they were explicitly tied to learners' career objectives and professional trajectories. Advising and outreach that acknowledged students' dual roles as professionals and learners—and that framed success not only as course completion but as transformation toward a professional identity—were perceived as most valuable.

This perspective echoes the Ortagus et al. (2024) call for institutions to ensure that online program structures are intentionally designed to guide students toward realistic, career-relevant outcomes rather than merely degree attainment. Structured peer mentoring can strengthen these connections. Mauldin et al. (2022) documented that new online students who were intentionally connected with more experienced peers through moderated discussion boards and informal chat channels experienced stronger social integration, while Akers (2021) and Rotar (2022) emphasize that embedding such peer connections into program design improves satisfaction and persistence by giving learners visible role models who have successfully navigated similar academic and professional paths. This aligns with Watson et al.'s (2024) recommendation that online programs deepen their understanding of the obstacles non-traditional learners face in balancing academic demands with work, family, and other responsibilities, and design support structures that actively counter the rigid traditions that can otherwise drive attrition.

Programs that embed such alignment into academic and co-curricular support—integrating career-focused advising, professional identity development, and peer networks—create a more coherent, motivating learner experience that sustains engagement and persistence over time.

Building Inclusive and Equitable Support Systems

For support to be equitable, it must also be inclusive. Racially minoritized students, first-generation college students, and learners with disabilities often face disproportionate barriers in online programs. These challenges can stem from structural inequities, limited access to high-speed internet or adaptive technologies, and a lack of cultural or contextual

understanding in course delivery and advising. Pham et al. (2022) surfaced these tensions in their study of a cohort-based EdD program, where students formed strong peer bonds, but some felt excluded or misunderstood in instructional or advising settings. Similar findings across the literature point to the risks of assuming that community automatically translates to belonging; without intentional design and facilitation, certain students may remain on the margins (Ortagus et al., 2023; Baker & Tukhvatulina, 2023).

This underscores the need for culturally responsive support structures—not only in curriculum, but in staff training, advising language, and the representation of diverse experiences in student-facing content. As Mead et al. (2023) observed, online students with disabilities often received fewer formal accommodations than their in-person peers. However, they benefited greatly from embedded features such as flexible deadlines, recorded lectures, and asynchronous access—elements that function as informal accommodations benefiting all learners. Programs that normalize such universal design elements remove the need for students to request basic adjustments, reducing stigma and increasing participation.

Inclusive support systems address barriers at multiple levels:

- Technological access through device lending, subsidized software, and connectivity assistance, ensuring students can participate fully regardless of geography or income.
- Cultural navigation via mentoring programs, affinity groups, and structured community-building initiatives that recognize and validate diverse identities and experiences.
- Academic scaffolding that builds confidence while maintaining rigor, offering layered feedback, milestone check-ins, and adaptive learning pathways tailored to varied preparation levels.

Ultimately, inclusivity in support is not a parallel service for "some" students but a design principle that strengthens outcomes for all learners.

Technology as a Connector—or a Barrier—to Support

Technology plays a double role in learner support: it can connect or alienate. When intentionally embedded into course design, it serves as a bridge, giving students consistent, on-demand access to the necessary resources. Bryan et al. (2021) addressed this in the RN-to-BSN program by standardizing the Blackboard navigation menu across all courses to include a dedicated "Support" section. This section linked directly to tutoring services, library resources, technical help, and accessibility services—ensuring students could locate assistance without leaving the learning environment. University policies on academic support and accessibility were also clearly stated in each syllabus, reinforcing availability and ease of access. This design reduced the cognitive load of searching for help and increased the likelihood that students would use available services. Conversely, when technology is fragmented—requiring multiple logins, scattering resources across unlinked platforms, or varying navigation from course to course—it risks alienating learners, especially those balancing work, family, and study. In this way, the same technology that can close support gaps can also widen them, depending on how seamlessly it is integrated into the learning experience.

Sustaining Support Across the Student Lifecycle

Support in fully online degree programs must be continuous, not confined to onboarding. While early-term interventions are essential—particularly for helping students acclimate to online tools, expectations, and community norms—successful programs build structured touchpoints throughout the student journey. Midpoint surveys, degree audits, capstone advising, and transition-to-career support signal that the institution remains invested from entry to exit. Research underscores the importance of such continuity: Mauldin (2022) found that peer and cohort relationships can sustain engagement well beyond the first term, providing a consistent social anchor. Akers (2021) demonstrates that proactive advising and regular outreach during each stage of the term help identify emerging challenges and connect students with targeted resources before issues escalate.

Similarly, Rotar (2022) emphasizes embedding recurring resource touchpoints directly into course flow—such as just-in-time links to advising, tutoring, or career services—to maintain momentum and respond to evolving needs.

Effective support is also dynamic, adapting to students' changing expectations and contexts. As Baker and Tukhvatulina (2023) observed in their interviews with adult learners, students value clear organization, personalized feedback, and consistent care across all courses. Multimedia elements, voice-over lectures, and opportunities to connect coursework with personal experiences enhance engagement and signal a culture of student-centered design. Roseland and Saeger (2023) illustrate how a program-wide communication strategy—featuring personalized weekly announcements, assignment previews, and targeted check-ins—can strengthen instructor presence and counter the isolation often reported in asynchronous environments.

Finally, institutions must recognize that the nature of learner support evolves. Shepherd and Bolliger's (2023) IPP Community Framework highlights that services valuable during onboarding—such as orientation or technical assistance—should give way to deeper engagement opportunities as students progress. Mentoring, research collaborations, and career-focused guidance become increasingly relevant in later stages. A mature support ecosystem intentionally shifts its focus to align with students' developmental, academic, and professional trajectories, ensuring that engagement and connection are sustained through graduation and beyond.

Principles for High-Quality Learner Support

Chakraborty (2024) framed learner support as a core component of an institution's "digital quality," linking it directly to competitiveness, legitimacy, and long-term viability. In this view, support is not merely student-facing—it is a strategic imperative. High-quality learner support enhances the student experience while differentiating institutions in a crowded online education market, strengthening their reputation and appeal to prospective students. CHLOE findings reinforce this connection, showing that institutions rating their online student experience as "excellent" are more likely to provide proactive, well-integrated support services—and that these institutions consistently report higher retention rates and stronger enrollment growth than peers with less comprehensive systems (Simunich et al., 2025). Programs that systematically invest in support infrastructure, feedback mechanisms, and continuous improvement are better positioned to serve diverse learners and sustain success in an increasingly competitive online marketplace.

Ultimately, high-quality learner support reflects three core principles:

- **Intentionality** – Support is designed in, not bolted on, and embedded across the student lifecycle (Akers, 2021; Rotar, 2022; Shepherd & Bolliger, 2023)
- **Relevance** – Support is aligned to student goals, contexts, and identities, fostering connection to academic and professional pathways (Mauldin et al., 2022; Krsmanovic & Foster, 2025; Pham et al., 2022)
- **Accessibility** – Support is easy to find, responsive, and inclusive, with clear pathways and proactive outreach to ensure equity of access (Mead et al., 2023; Rotar, 2022)
- **Continuity** – Support is sustained across all program stages, adapting to changing learner needs from entry to graduation (Akers, 2021; Mauldin, 2022; Rotar, 2022)

While these systems create the foundation for learner achievement, defining and measuring success requires more than tracking traditional metrics like completion rates. A holistic understanding of learner success should also encompass what students achieve academically and how they grow personally and professionally through their online learning journey—capturing motivation, skill development, and evolving professional identity alongside institutional benchmarks.

Learner Success: Assessment, Motivation, and Persistence

Learner success in fully online programs is often measured through traditional metrics—grades, retention rates, and graduation timelines—but these surface-level indicators rarely capture the depth or complexity of the student experience. A more holistic understanding of success must also account for motivation, cognitive engagement, skill development, and students' evolving sense of purpose and professional identity. In the online environment, where learners face unique challenges such as social isolation, balancing professional and personal responsibilities, and managing their own learning pace, success is shaped by more than individual effort. It is the cumulative result of purposeful program design that embeds clear learning pathways and relevant, real-world applications; strategic and timely feedback that reinforces progress and fosters reflection; and an institutional culture that prioritizes sustained support and equitable access to resources (Ortagus et al., 2023, 2024). This is particularly critical for non-traditional learners, who often juggle academic work, careers, caregiving, and other obligations. Watson et al. (2024) emphasize that retaining these students requires dismantling rigid academic traditions and implementing flexible structures that respond to the realities of adult learners' lives. Quality frameworks, such as the QM Program Certification for Online Learner Success, emphasize integrating multiple measures—including mastery of learning outcomes, alumni career progression, and post-graduation employment data—into success profiles to capture academic achievement and long-term impact. In some online programs, student success profiles integrate LMS engagement analytics, course performance data, and post-graduation career tracking to pinpoint which learning experiences most strongly align with positive employment outcomes. Such integrated data systems enable faculty and advisors to make evidence-based adjustments to curriculum and support services, ensuring that course design promotes academic achievement and advances professional readiness (Akers, 2021; Rotar, 2022). Case studies, such as the Online MBA program's integration of SDGs across its curriculum, demonstrate how intentional, authentic learning experiences can foster enduring competencies and a strong sense of purpose among graduates (Grincewicz et al., 2023).

Assessment Design and Authentic Learning

A central component of this broader view is assessment design. In high-quality ODPs, **assessments do more than evaluate knowledge—they drive engagement,** reinforce learning, and support long-term retention. When assessments are authentic, timely, and aligned with learning outcomes, they contribute to learner motivation and deeper processing.

Bryan et al. (2021), in their evaluation of a fully online nursing program, emphasized using rubrics and structured feedback as part of a system-wide approach to continuous improvement. Other programs have linked authentic assessment directly to community impact. As part of an authentic assessment strategy, some programs may design capstone experiences in which students collaborate with local or industry partners to address real-world challenges. This approach reflects Rotar's (2022) emphasis on embedding applied, context-rich tasks into program design, aligns with Shepherd and Bolliger's (2023) call for connecting assessment to professional relevance, and supports Baker and Tukhvatulina's (2023) findings that learners value assessments offering opportunities for meaningful application and reflection. Similarly, Dogan and Harris (2024) found that a fully online, asynchronous graduate program integrating extensive job-embedded fieldwork, collaborative inquiry, and structured reflection significantly increased graduates' reported use of professional practices, demonstrating how authentic, practice-based assessments can both strengthen competence and sustain learner motivation.

Authentic assessments serve three essential functions: (1) **competency demonstration**, where students apply knowledge and skills in realistic, professional contexts—such as projects, case studies, or simulations that mirror industry-relevant challenges—providing evidence of their ability to perform beyond the classroom; (2) **feedback generation**, which delivers actionable, timely insights that help students refine their understanding and performance while also enabling instructors to identify learning gaps, adjust instructional strategies, and improve course design; and (3) **motivation enhancement**, as learners recognize the tangible connection between their academic work and personal aspirations, career advancement, or contributions to their field, fostering a more profound sense of purpose and engagement.

Sustaining Learner Motivation

Motivation is sustained when students can track their progress and see how their learning connects to real-world goals. This is especially true for adult learners, many of whom return to education with specific career objectives and limited time. Programs that build in self-assessment opportunities, personalized progress dashboards, or goal-setting modules help learners maintain momentum. Dogan and Harris (2024) found that when a fully online graduate program embedded extensive job-embedded fieldwork, collaborative inquiry, and structured reflection tied to explicit learning outcomes, graduates reported significant increases in professional practices—evidence that authentic, applied experiences can reinforce motivation by making progress visible and directly relevant to learners' careers.

These strategies align with what Shepherd and Bolliger (2023) describe in their IPP Community Framework as the programmatic layer of belonging—a sense that one is not just passing courses, but growing within a coherent academic and professional identity.

However, **success is not merely academic; it is also emotional.** Learners thrive when they feel seen, supported, and understood. This sense of emotional presence—created through instructor tone, peer affirmation, and meaningful interaction—can shape how learners interpret their progress.

Together, these insights point to four interconnected design elements that, when intentionally integrated, can sustain motivation across the learner journey: (1) **clear progress indicators** that help students track their development, such as personalized dashboards, milestone tracking, or competency maps that visually show skill growth over time; (2) **meaningful connections** to peers, faculty, and professional networks, cultivated through collaborative assignments, peer review activities, discussion communities, and mentorship programs that foster a sense of belonging (Baker & Tukhvatulina, 2023); (3) **adaptive support** that responds to changing life circumstances, including flexible deadlines, proactive academic advising, and access to mental health or wellness resources (Ortagus et al., 2023, 2024); and (4) **visible relevance** linking coursework to career advancement, achieved by embedding industry-specific projects, authentic case studies, and professional skill-building activities directly into the curriculum. When intentionally designed and consistently reinforced, these elements create an environment where motivation is sparked and sustained throughout the learner's journey.

Building Belonging, Confidence, and Long-Term Impact

For many students, success begins with the reassurance that they belong. Particularly in asynchronous contexts, where isolation is a known risk, deliberate community-building efforts—such as peer mentoring, group assignments, or student-led discussions—serve as critical scaffolds for persistence and achievement. Research shows that structured peer relationships foster long-term engagement: Mauldin et al. (2022) found that intentional cohort connections and peer mentoring promote sustained social integration, while Akers (2021) and Rotar (2022) highlight that embedding these interactions into program design ensures they are ongoing and accessible rather than optional add-ons. In nursing education specifically, Hakkarainen et al. (2024) found that students valued individualized faculty attention, rapid responses to inquiries, and even faculty travel to distance sites—practices that reinforced community belonging—yet they also reported that insufficient peer and faculty interaction could erode this sense of connection.

In environments with limited real-time cues and spontaneous interactions, feedback becomes a primary form of instructional presence. Baker and Tukhvatulina (2023) emphasize that clear organization and personalized, constructive feedback strengthen students' sense of connection to their instructors and the program. Timely, specific guidance clarifies expectations and links individual performance to broader program competencies, helping learners see how each assignment contributes to their overall growth. Dogan and Harris (2024) add that when feedback is embedded in authentic, practice-based assessments—such as job-embedded projects and collaborative inquiry—it reinforces motivation by making progress visible, relevant, and directly applicable to learners' professional contexts. Hakkarainen et al. (2024) similarly identified regular feedback and effective learning methods as critical factors supporting academic performance in online nursing programs. This targeted, context-rich guidance transforms learning from a passive process into an actively integrated and personally meaningful one. When feedback also prompts reflection and self-assessment, it empowers students to take ownership of their learning and develop the skills to adapt and improve academically and professionally.

Academic rigor further supports learner success when paired with transparency and clear expectations. Shepherd and Bolliger (2023) and Joshi (2022) note that aligned rubrics, examples of successful work, and explicit guidance on meeting standards help learners not only master content but also develop self-regulated learning strategies. Such clarity builds trust in the program's structure and reinforces the belief that effort will lead to measurable progress.

Longitudinally, success unfolds as transformation—how learners integrate new knowledge into their identities and trajectories. Krsmanovic and Foster (2025) found that adult doctoral students most often associated success with professional growth and career advancement rather than GPA. Similarly, Hakkarainen et al. (2024) found that nursing students valued online programs for enabling career development and professional advancement. This aligns with Grincewicz et al.'s (2022) argument that too many programs equate success with completion rates or enrollment volume rather than long-term impact. They advocate for a model in which success is measured by what students do with their learning—how they lead, serve, and solve problems in the world—months or even years beyond graduation.

By cultivating belonging, delivering feedback that is both constructive and context-rich, and reframing success beyond short-term academic metrics, online degree programs can create conditions where learners are not only retained and graduated but also equipped to thrive, adapt, and contribute meaningfully in their professional and civic lives.

Principles for High-Quality Learner Success

Long-term success often manifests as transformation—how learners integrate knowledge into their identities and careers. Krsmanovic and Foster (2025) found that adult doctoral students most often defined success as professional growth rather than GPA. Similarly, Hakkarainen et al. (2024) reported that online nursing students valued programs for enabling career development and advancement. Grincewicz et al. (2022) argue that institutions must move beyond equating success with completion or enrollment volume, instead measuring the real-world application, leadership, and problem-solving graduates demonstrate months or years after program completion.

To support this vision of learner success, institutions should:

- **Define learner success broadly** – Expand beyond traditional metrics (grades, retention, graduation) to include motivation, cognitive engagement, skill development, and evolving professional identity, ensuring program design aligns with long-term learner growth (Ortagus et al., 2023, 2024).
- **Integrate authentic, applied assessments** – Use assessments that demonstrate competencies in realistic contexts, connect learning to professional practice, and foster reflection for deeper, sustained engagement (Dogan & Harris, 2024; Rotar, 2022; Shepherd & Bolliger, 2023).
- **Deliver timely, actionable feedback** – Provide personalized, context-rich feedback that clarifies expectations, strengthens program connection, and

supports self-assessment and improvement (Baker & Tukhvatulina, 2023; Bryan et al., 2021; Dogan & Harris, 2024).
- **Sustain motivation with clear progress indicators** – Embed tools such as dashboards, milestone tracking, and competency maps to make growth visible and connect coursework to career goals (Baker & Tukhvatulina, 2023; Dogan & Harris, 2024).
- **Foster belonging and peer connection** – Build intentional community through mentoring, collaborative projects, and ongoing interaction that supports persistence and professional identity (Akers, 2021; Hakkarainen et al., 2024; Mauldin et al., 2022; Rotar, 2022).
- **Evaluate success through long-term impact** – Track alumni career progression, employment outcomes, and professional application of skills to assess how learning translates into sustained success beyond graduation (Akers, 2021; Grincewicz et al., 2023; Rotar, 2022).

Individual success, however, rarely happens in isolation. Students who feel connected to peers, faculty, and their future professional selves will likely persist and thrive. This makes community building not a nice-to-have feature, but a strategic design element that cuts across all other quality dimensions.

Building Community in Online Programs: Belonging, Identity, and Engagement

In ODPs, the absence of physical proximity poses both a challenge and an opportunity: creating a sense of community that fosters belonging, shapes learner identity, and drives sustained engagement. While community-building has long been recognized as a contributor to student engagement, its role in online learning must be reimagined—not as a byproduct of instruction, but as a **core design element** embedded across the program lifecycle.

The most effective ODPs approach community as a multilayered ecosystem. Shepherd and Bolliger's (2023) IPP Community Framework illustrates how learners experience belonging in three overlapping spheres: (1) **institutional belonging** creates the foundation of trust and access, (2) **programmatic identity** builds academic confidence and peer connection, and (3) **professional relevance** sustains motivation through career alignment and networking opportunities. When all three layers are intentionally designed, students experience an inclusive, resilient community connected to their academic and professional goals.

Belonging

Institutional belonging forms the foundation of community in online programs. The institutional layer involves orientation, advising, policies, and services that signal to students, "You are part of this institution." Onboarding activities—virtual meet-and-greets, collaborative orientation modules, and early advising sessions—set a tone of care and accessibility.

Belonging must be intentionally designed, not left to chance. Programs that offer supportive faculty but have impersonal advising processes or inconsistent course navigation risk undermining trust and engagement. As Roseland and Saeger (2023) found, asynchronous students often relied on instructor presence, tone, and responsiveness as key connection indicators. Instructors who used consistent video announcements, wrote personalized feedback, and facilitated meaningful peer interaction created stronger perceptions of social presence and instructional care.

Equity is central to belonging. Baker and Tukhvatulina's (2023) qualitative study of adult learners in asynchronous ODPs found that despite appreciation for flexible pacing and career-relevant

assignments, students repeatedly cited a lack of human connection as a barrier to belonging. Participants described challenges in receiving timely responses, feeling "invisible" in their courses, and encountering inconsistencies in course design that disrupted navigation. The absence of instructor-initiated communication—weekly announcements, video lectures, or personal outreach—left many students unsure of expectations and disconnected from the learning process.

Underrepresented and nontraditional students often face additional barriers to online participation, including unreliable internet access, inconsistent support structures, and unfamiliarity with academic discourse conventions (Baker & Tukhvatulina, 2023; Pham et al., 2022). Culturally sustaining practices—inclusive language, diverse content, and acknowledging students' lived experiences—can help bridge these gaps. Instructors and designers can use strategies like identity-based reflection prompts, optional peer mentoring, or affinity-based discussion groups to offer multiple entry points into the learning community. Ultimately, cultivating a community in ODPs is not about replicating the campus experience but about reimagining belonging to the online modality. This requires a blend of design intentionality, facilitation skill, and organizational commitment, recognizing that connection is **both a personal need and a pedagogical imperative.**

Identity

While belonging connects students to the institution, identity connects them to their academic discipline and professional field. The programmatic layer of the IPP Framework builds cohesion through cohort models, shared milestones, and academic rituals—such as capstone projects, program-specific workshops, and peer mentorship—that build academic confidence and cohesion.

The professional layer connects learning to career aspirations, networks, and applied practice, reinforcing the message, "You belong in this field." Programs can embed career-aligned assignments, virtual networking events, alumni panels, and global project work to strengthen professional belonging and sustain long-term motivation. These experiences prepare students for future roles and deepen their sense of identity within the discipline. Professional development, capstone showcases, and alum engagement become particularly important as students approach graduation. Programs can support continuity and identity development by designing community touchpoints across the learner lifecycle.

Students are more likely to feel seen and respected when the community views difference as a strength rather than a barrier. Culturally sustaining practices, representation in course content, and intentional acknowledgment of students' lived experiences help strengthen academic and professional identity. Strategies like identity-based discussion prompts, affinity groups, and representation in course materials invite learners to integrate personal and professional growth.

Inclusive community design requires three strategic approaches: (1) multiple entry points that accommodate different communication styles and cultural backgrounds, (2) explicit norm-setting that promotes respectful interaction and shared responsibility, and (3) ongoing facilitation that addresses conflicts and maintains engagement momentum. Shepherd and Bolliger (2023) note that belonging at the institutional level helps students stay enrolled; belonging at the programmatic level helps them persist through academic challenges; belonging at the professional level helps them envision and enact their future selves. When these layers of identity are reinforced through intentional design, they naturally fuel active engagement—transforming connections from a sense of "who I am" into shared actions, collaborations, and contributions that sustain the online learning community.

Engagement

Engagement is the active expression of belonging and identity in daily learning interactions, and it is strengthened when professional connections are built into the program experience. Activities such as virtual networking events, alumni panels, global teamwork projects, and applied industry collaborations reinforce the professional layer of identity and serve

as powerful engagement drivers. These experiences motivate learners by linking their academic work to future roles and real-world impact.

Instructors play a central role as relational anchors, especially in asynchronous environments where human connection can be limited. Consistent, personalized communication—such as video updates, feedback that goes beyond grades, and recognition of student contributions—encourages sustained participation (Roseland & Saeger, 2023).

Peer-to-peer interaction also plays a vital role in shaping community. Pham et al. (2022) observed that students in a fully online EdD program built deep bonds through shared discussion boards, messaging platforms, and group work. However, they also uncovered tensions—some students felt excluded due to cultural misunderstandings or differences in communication style. These findings remind us that **community is not automatically inclusive; it must be cultivated** with attention to equity, representation, and accessibility.

Students often step in to build community where formal structures fall short. Learners in Pham et al.'s (2022) study used informal tools—like group text threads, Zoom hangouts, and peer mentoring networks—to fill relational gaps. These grassroots efforts were instrumental in fostering camaraderie, but they were not without limitations. Programs can mitigate this by scaffolding inclusive interaction norms and offering multiple platforms for connection, ensuring no student is left on the periphery.

When institutions invest in instructor development, cross-functional design collaboration, and staff inclusion, they model the values—care, equity, and continuous improvement—they hope students will practice.

Technology can enable or hinder engagement. Overreliance on discussion boards without meaningful prompts can lead to performative engagement. On the other hand, thoughtful use of tools like asynchronous video platforms, collaborative whiteboards, or team-based projects can deepen connection. The point is not to adopt more tools, but to use technology to support human connection and mutual recognition.

Finally, faculty and staff are not only facilitators of learning but members of the learning community. When institutions invest in instructor development, cross-functional design collaboration, and staff inclusion, they model the values—care, equity, and continuous improvement—they hope students will practice. In high-functioning online programs, this means building capacity for "relational presence" (clear communication, responsiveness, and inclusive interpersonal behaviors) alongside technical and pedagogical skill, so that instructors and staff serve as dependable community anchors across courses and touchpoints.

Principles for High-Quality Learning Communities

To build an authentic, inclusive, and resilient community in online programs, institutions should:

- Design community touchpoints across the learner lifecycle—from onboarding through alumnihood
- Prioritize instructor presence and peer connection in asynchronous spaces
- Embed culturally sustaining practices and equity-minded pedagogy
- Align community-building efforts with students' academic and professional identities
- Support faculty and staff as relational anchors in the online environment

The principles that create authentic community—shared responsibility, continuous feedback, and collaborative improvement—define effective quality assurance. Rather than treating quality as a compliance exercise, the most successful online programs embed it as an institutional ethic that shapes every design decision and daily practice.

Quality Assurance Through Integrated Frameworks

Online learners are more likely to persist, grow, and succeed when they feel connected to peers, instructors, and purpose—a connection that can be intentionally cultivated through integrated quality assurance frameworks. In holistic online degree programs, quality assurance (QA) is not a checklist applied at the end of course design; it is a continuous, systemic process that prioritizes coherence, equity, and improvement across all program elements. Research underscores that inconsistent instructional design, spotty interaction with faculty, and isolation from services can undermine persistence, particularly in fully online programs (Baker & Tukhvatulina, 2023; Turnbull, 2021). Frameworks such as QM program-level certifications emphasize alignment between course- and program-level objectives, consistent navigation, accessible materials, and embedded learner and faculty support systems. When these elements are intentionally integrated at the program level, community is not just something students experience—it is something they help build through purposeful engagement, collaborative learning, and shared ownership of the educational journey (Baker & Tukhvatulina, 2023; Turnbull, 2021).

That same ethic of shared responsibility extends to program quality. **Quality assurance is not an end-stage review but a strategic commitment** to coherence, equity, and excellence. It must be embedded across institutional policy, course design, faculty development, and student experience.

Internal consistency manifests in three critical areas: (1) **navigation patterns** that create predictable user experiences across courses, (2) **communication standards** that establish clear expectations for faculty responsiveness and feedback, and (3) **assessment alignment** that ensures learning objectives translate into meaningful evaluation criteria.

As online programs expand and expectations rise, institutions with a holistic quality model—rooted in strategic alignment, collaboration, and continuous improvement—are best positioned to support learners and earn stakeholder trust.

From Fragmentation to Integration

High-functioning ODPs do not treat quality assurance as a fragmented, end-stage task. Instead, it is embedded throughout the learner journey—from initial program design and student onboarding to graduation and alumni engagement. This integrated approach positions QA as a continuous, systemic process that aligns institutional mission, curricular coherence, faculty development, and learner support into a unified framework (Baker & Tukhvatulina, 2023; Ortagus et al., 2023, 2024). Rather than relying solely on isolated course evaluations, programs can employ program-wide learning outcome mapping, consistent navigation and media standards, and proactive feedback loops to ensure quality remains visible and actionable at every stage.

The Online MBA case study demonstrates how faculty, instructional designers, and administrators can co-create a shared QA culture—aligning program learning outcomes to professional competencies, adopting unifying themes, and achieving both course-level and program-level QM certifications—ensuring that rigor, accessibility, and learner relevance are sustained over time (Grincewicz et al., 2022, 2023; Grincewicz & Simunich, 2024). The four QM Program Certifications provide a helpful framework for understanding this integration:

- **Program Design Certification** ensures that learning outcomes, course structure, and curriculum alignment create a coherent educational journey.
- **Teaching Support Certification** emphasizes instructor readiness, presence, and responsiveness—foundational for sustained engagement and community.
- **Learner Support Certification** evaluates how well students can access and benefit from advising, technical help, academic resources, and other services.
- **Learner Success Certification** focuses on how programs define, measure, and continuously improve student success outcomes such as retention, completion, and employment.

These certifications offer a blueprint for a systematized, student-centered approach to online program quality that reflects technical standards and shared values.

Coherence as a Cornerstone of Quality

Internal consistency—across course navigation, assessment practices, and instructor expectations—is one of the most tangible indicators of program quality for students. When these elements vary widely from one course to another, learners report confusion, increased cognitive load, and reduced motivation.

Baker and Tukhvatulina (2023) found that adult learners in asynchronous programs were especially sensitive to inconsistencies linked to diminished satisfaction and persistence.

Addressing this challenge requires more than individual course fixes. Bryan et al. (2021) documented how one online RN-to-BSN program used curriculum mapping and Bloom's taxonomy to align course-level and program-level outcomes. More than 95% of learning objectives were measurable and aligned.

This alignment effort led to multiple courses achieving QM certification and a more coherent and navigable student experience. Consistency is not rigidity—it is scaffolding. Predictable design structures help learners focus on content rather than platform logistics, particularly for nontraditional students managing work, family, and study simultaneously.

This coherence extends beyond course design to the systems that support learners throughout their journey. Support services—such as academic advising, library access, tutoring, and mental health resources—must be available, visible, navigable, and integrated into the learning environment.

The QM Learner Support Certification emphasizes this infrastructure, recognizing that students cannot succeed if they are unaware of—or unable to use—the resources intended to help them.

Continuous Improvement Through Feedback Loops

Quality assurance must be dynamic. Bryan et al. (2021) embedded Human Performance Technology (HPT) principles—formative, summative, confirmatory, and meta-evaluation—to evolve the program through iterative cycles. When learners see that their input shapes revisions, engagement, and trust grow.

Effective feedback loops operate at three levels: (1) **real-time analytics** that identify engagement patterns and early warning signals, (2) **structured reflection** through student surveys and faculty self-assessment, and (3) **longitudinal tracking** that measures program impact on career outcomes and satisfaction.

Real-time analytics, such as participation dashboards and assignment alerts, also support early interventions, embodying the proactive ethos of the Learner Success Certification.

Faculty and Designers as Co-Stewards of Quality

Faculty are not recipients of quality assurance—they are co-creators. Joshi (2022) highlights that in digitally mature institutions, pedagogical quality grows from strategic collaboration.

ODPs that pair subject matter experts with instructional designers, librarians, and assessment specialists generate more coherent, inclusive courses. This collaborative model supports the Teaching Support and Program Design certifications, reinforcing shared ownership of quality.

Faculty development anchored in QM principles deepens instructional reflection and fosters course consistency. Peer reviews, feedback-informed templates, and shared design standards enhance teaching and learning.

Legitimacy Through Visible Quality

Digital quality now shapes institutional reputation. Chakraborty (2024) argues that responsiveness, transparency, and support systems are core to institutional legitimacy. Learners and accreditors alike evaluate ODPs based on the reliability and meaningfulness of their offerings.

Pursuing QM Program Certification helps institutions demonstrate visible, systemic quality. As Mariasingam and Hanna (2006) emphasized nearly two decades ago, sustainable online programs require alignment across mission, delivery modes, instructional practices, and learner services.

That insight has only grown more relevant. Pursuing the full suite of QM Program Certifications enables institutions to demonstrate that quality is not siloed but systematically cultivated.

A Culture, Not a Checklist

Institutions with a sustainable ODPs approach quality not as a compliance box to check, but as **a culture to nurture.** This shift requires deliberate strategy:

- **Define quality holistically**, integrating student experience, faculty support, and outcome achievement.
- **Standardize what matters**—such as navigation, feedback cadence, and assessment alignment—while preserving instructional creativity.
- **Use data iteratively**, not just for reporting, but for real-time improvement.
- **Empower faculty** through collaborative design, peer review, and ongoing development.
- **Align** with mission and values so that quality assurance reflects the institution and who it serves.

Understanding these integrated quality principles is one thing; implementing them systematically is another. The following recommendations translate research insights into actionable strategies that institutions can adapt to their contexts, resources, and student populations.

Recommendations

Designing a high-quality ODP requires far more than digitizing courses. It demands systemic thinking, institutional alignment, and sustained investment in people, processes, and platforms.

The following recommendations offer a roadmap for building, maintaining, and enhancing ODPs that are academically rigorous, community-oriented, and grounded in evidence-based practice. These strategies draw from the research and cases explored in this white paper and align with the four core pillars of holistic quality: Program Design, Teaching Support, Learner Support, and Learner Success.

Planning Phase: Building the Foundation

1 *Start with Purpose, Not Platform* (Year-long initiative)

- Clearly define the rationale for launching a fully online degree, considering institutional mission, market needs, and ethical implications.
- Ensure alignment between program outcomes, student goals, and career pathways.
- Conduct environmental scans and competitor analysis to avoid saturation and ensure distinctiveness.

Potential obstacles: Market saturation, unclear institutional priorities, competing internal initiatives.

Workarounds: Engage external consultants for market analysis, establish a cross-departmental planning committee, and pilot with certificate programs first.

2 *Establish Curriculum Alignment Early* (Semester-long project)

- Map course-level learning outcomes to program-level outcomes using Bloom's taxonomy and measurable verbs.
- Create alignment tables and curriculum maps that are reviewed collaboratively by faculty, designers, and assessment leads.
- Design for transfer of learning emphasizing real-world applications and interdisciplinary connections.

Potential obstacles: Faculty resistance to standardization, time constraints, and lack of assessment expertise.

Workarounds: Provide stipends for mapping work, use external facilitators, start with pilot courses, and offer QM training workshops.

3 *Integrate Instructional Designers from the Outset* (Quick win)

- Involve instructional designers in the earliest stages of program planning, not just course development.
- Encourage cross-functional collaboration between faculty, designers, librarians, and student services to ensure comprehensive design.
- Build shared course templates or shell structures that balance consistency with flexibility.

Potential obstacles: Limited instructional designer staffing, faculty skepticism, and budget constraints.

Workarounds: Contract with external IDs, create faculty-ID partnership incentives, and develop scalable template systems.

4 *Define Quality Benchmarks and Feedback Systems* (Semester-long project)

- Determine how quality will be measured and communicated—internally and externally.
- Set up systems for continuously collecting learner feedback, course analytics, and faculty input.
- Align quality goals with external standards (e.g., accreditation, employer expectations) and internal capacity.

Potential obstacles: Data system limitations, unclear success metrics, stakeholder disagreement on priorities.

Workarounds: Start with simple survey tools, benchmark against peer institutions, and use a phased implementation approach.

Implementation Phase: Supporting the Humans Behind the Screens

1 ***Build a Culture of Teaching Support and Development*** *(Year-long project)*

- Offer structured onboarding for new online instructors, including pedagogy, technology, and presence strategies.
- Develop long-term professional development pathways tied to program goals and recognition (e.g., stipends, awards, peer leadership roles).
- Encourage faculty participation in instructional redesign and research to foster buy-in and shared ownership.

Potential obstacles: Faculty time constraints, insufficient professional development budget, and resistance to change.

Workarounds: Offer release time, create peer mentoring programs, tie development to promotion criteria, and start with voluntary participants.

2 **Embed Learner Support Across the Lifecycle** *(Semester-long project)*

- Design learner services with intentional online access points: orientation, advising, writing support, mental health, library access, and accommodations.
- Embed student success resources into course shells and link directly from weekly modules.
- Train staff and faculty on recognizing disengagement early and intervening with care.

Potential obstacles: Siloed support services, staff training needs, and technology integration challenges.

Workarounds: Create cross-functional support teams, use LMS integration tools, develop staff training modules, and pilot with one program first.

3 **Standardize Instructor Presence and Consistency** *(Quick win)*

- Create communication routines for asynchronous environments (e.g., weekly announcements, check-in nudges, structured feedback loops).
- Use media and multimedia, such as voice, video, infographics, and screen recordings, to humanize instruction.
- Develop clear guidelines around feedback timelines, office hours, and student expectations for responsiveness.

Potential obstacles: Faculty technology comfort levels, inconsistent implementation, and increased workload concerns.

Workarounds: Provide technology training, create communication templates, use automation tools, and establish reasonable expectations.

4 ***Design for Motivation and Persistence*** *(Semester-long project)*

- Integrate authentic assessments that allow students to apply knowledge in their professional or personal contexts.
- Offer flexible pacing options (e.g., 8-week or 16-week term choices, competency-based progression).
- Anticipate “burnout points” (e.g., mid-program fatigue), and build in community touchpoints, faculty check-ins, and success workshops.

Potential obstacles: Accreditation requirements, faculty workload, and technology limitations for flexible pacing.

Workarounds: Work with accreditors early, use competency-based frameworks, implement gradual flexibility increases, and create automated check-in systems.

Sustainability Phase: Evaluating, Iterating, and Expanding

1 *Implement Feedback-to-Improvement Pipelines* (Quick win)

- Treat student evaluations and course data not as static reports but as catalysts for improvement.
- Use design-based research or improvement science cycles to test changes and scale effective practices.
- Include student voices in redesign conversations (e.g., through advisory panels, mid-course surveys, or alumni reflections).

Potential obstacles: Data overload, lack of analysis capacity, slow response to feedback.

Workarounds: Initially, focus on 2–3 key metrics, train staff in data analysis, create rapid-cycle improvement processes, and use student advisory boards.

2 *Maintain Strategic Alignment and Institutional Support* (Year-long project)

- Ensure quality assurance processes are integrated into regular institutional planning, not just one-off reviews.
- Support sustainable staffing models for instructional design, online student services, and digital infrastructure.
- Develop succession plans for key roles and standard operating procedures to preserve institutional knowledge.

Potential obstacles: Leadership changes, budget pressures, competing institutional priorities.

Workarounds: Document all processes, create cross-training programs, build quality into governance structures, and develop cost-benefit analyses.

3 *Cultivate a Multi-Layered Community Model* (Semester-long project)

- Design for community across the institutional, program, and professional layers, following frameworks like IPP.
- Maintain alumni engagement through networking events, mentoring opportunities, and continuing education.
- Consider offering microcredentials or certificates within degree programs to extend value and promote lifelong learning.

Potential obstacles: Community-building fatigue, technology platform limitations, alumni engagement challenges.

Workarounds: Vary community activities, leverage social media platforms, create alumni incentives, and start with pilot communities.

4 *Evaluate Learner Success Holistically* (Year-long project)

- Move beyond completion rates to include career advancement, self-efficacy, and skill application in program evaluation.
- Use a mix of quantitative (retention, GPA, time-to-degree) and qualitative (surveys, interviews, portfolios) data sources.
- Share findings with stakeholders and use them to inform accreditation reports, strategic planning, and future program offerings.

Potential obstacles: Difficulty tracking long-term outcomes, alumni response rates, and complex data integration.

Workarounds: Partner with professional organizations, use social media for tracking, create alumni incentives for participation, and start with shorter-term metrics.

Closing Perspective on Implementation

These recommendations represent more than operational improvements—they fundamentally shift how institutions approach online education. Moving from course-by-course development to systematic program design requires strategic vision and sustained commitment.

KEY IMPLEMENTATION TIPS:

- Start with quick wins to build momentum and stakeholder confidence.
- Secure leadership commitment before beginning semester-long or year-long initiatives.
- Use pilot programs to test approaches before full-scale implementation.
- Build in regular checkpoints to assess progress and adjust strategies.
- Celebrate successes along the way to maintain engagement and support.

Conclusion: Designing for Transformation, Not Just Delivery

As colleges and universities expand their online degree offerings, the question is no longer whether online learning can be done, but whether it can be done well. This white paper has argued that **quality in fully online degree programs is not achieved through isolated course design or ad hoc faculty training.**

It is achieved through a holistic, system-oriented approach that aligns curriculum, support, instruction, and assessment with institutional mission and learner success.

High-quality ODPs integrate four interdependent pillars: Program Design, Teaching Support, Learner Support, and Learner Success. These pillars reflect the core dimensions of the QM Program Certifications, but are also more than standards. They are strategic commitments that shape every stage of the student journey—from program entry to degree completion, and from content mastery to career impact.

This paper has shown that effective program design begins with alignment between learning outcomes, instructional practices, and assessment strategies. It continues with faculty support structures that treat instructors not as content deliverers but as facilitators of presence, feedback, and connection. It includes accessible, inclusive, and purpose-driven learner support systems and concludes with a broader vision of success that includes persistence, identity development, and professional transformation.

Community-building, too, emerges as a cross-cutting imperative. The research is clear: students who feel connected to peers, instructors, and future selves will likely engage deeply and persist meaningfully. Online programs that invest in relational design and inclusive pedagogical practices are not simply more effective; they are more just.

Ultimately, the challenge of designing for quality in ODPs is not a technological one—it is an institutional one. It requires intentional leadership, resourcing, collaboration, and accountability. It demands that institutions resist shortcuts in favor of sustainable systems.

Moreover, it calls for centering people—students, instructors, designers, and staff—to be the drivers and recipients of quality.

This paper offers a different metric: **transformation in an educational landscape** where flexibility and scale are often prized. Programs that embrace a holistic approach are not just delivering content at a distance. They are building pathways for learners to grow, connect, and lead.

The QM framework gives us the scaffolding, and these research insights provide the blueprint. The question isn't whether we can build transformative online programs—it's whether we will choose to do the systematic work required.

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