

COLO Profiles & Competencies 2024

A National Research Project about Chief Online Learning Officers

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Abstract

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, online learning has become a central component of higher education in the United States, elevating the importance of the Chief Online Learning Officer (COLO) role in implementation, leadership, and strategic development. This national study builds on previous COLO research conducted in 2017 and 2018, as well as insights from the Changing Landscape of Online Education (CHLOE) reports. During the summer of 2024, data was gathered from more than 500 online learning leaders, exploring their backgrounds and experiences as they drive online learning initiatives at their institutions. The study provides organizational context and comparative insights. A notable addition to this research is the introduction of the University Professional and Continuing Education Association COLO Competency and Attribute Statements for Professional, Continuing, and Online Practitioners (UPCEA COLO Competencies), which assess the relevance of various competencies to their colleges and universities, alongside a self-evaluation of their skills. This comprehensive analysis aims to illuminate the evolving role of COLOs and inform best practices in online education leadership.

Keywords: online learning, leadership, higher education, UPCEA COLO Competencies

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Introduction

With online learning in U.S. higher education now achieving mainstream status, there is great value in examining the leadership for this essential academic activity and the individuals who guide those programs and initiatives. This can be beneficial to the individual COLOs as they consider their own professional development and career planning. This can also help institutions and their executives with organizational planning and strategies for this critical area.

We believe that it is also very important to do this research now. We are only a few years past the COVID-19 global pandemic, an unprecedented catalyst for the advancement of online education and the realization of the essential role it can play in academic offerings. In addition, higher education is facing enrollment challenges, and online education has the potential to enhance access and provide an attractive option for students. Lastly, institutional leaders are facing a unique technological innovation with the rapid development of AI. They are trying to leverage the opportunities it presents while mitigating the challenges for all instruction, both traditional, in-person, as well as online.

The goals of this study were:

- Revisit and build on the national studies of online learning leadership.
- Collect institutional data for context.
- Gather information about the position and professional experience of the leader.
- Gain the COLO perspective on the importance of the UPCEA COLO Competencies at their institution and their own self-assessment of those skills and aptitudes.
- Investigate the potential relationships among these factors and dimensions.

Research Questions

Our research questions are directly connected to the goals of this study:

1. What is the current state of online education at responding institutions?
2. What are the background skills and experiences of current leaders of online learning?
3. What is the importance of the COLO Competencies at their institution, and what is their self-assessment with these competencies?

These research questions guided the study and informed our methodology and survey instrument. For example, to explore the current state of online education at responding institutions, it is essential to ask about the scope of online learning associated with the position, reporting relationships, and organizational structure. Regarding background and experiences, we inquired about a variety of skills, potential roles as a faculty member or student, and prior, current, and future titles. To better understand the significance of the COLO Competencies, we asked about their importance at the institution and the COLO's self-assessment regarding these competencies.

Literature Review

Prior studies highlighted organizational theories in higher education that are relevant to understanding how colleges and universities work. Rather than repeat a discussion of the concepts of *Organized Anarchy* (Cohen & March, 1986), *Loosely Coupled Systems* (Weick, 1976), and *Professional Bureaucracy* (Mintzberg, 1979), we encourage readers to revisit the *OLJ* article “A national study of online learning leaders in US higher education” (Fredericksen, 2017). Beyond those core organizational and cultural concepts, the research literature about leadership in higher education offers additional insight for COLOs.

A review of the literature highlights key issues and strategies of successful higher education leaders. In the 2015 article, “Qualities of effective leadership in higher education,” Black emphasizes some of the organizational concerns and unique aspects of the higher education sector noted above. Not only is this context relevant and important, but it also helps us reflect on some leadership models that are more appropriate in higher education. Various leadership models were discussed, with hierarchical and individualistic models being discouraged and others, such as collegial, collaborative, and transformative, being emphasized as more likely to be effective in higher education institutions (Black, 2015). The author goes on to highlight leadership competency frameworks as being helpful guides but urges caution. There can be a significant difference between knowing what one needs to do and how one does it.

The American Council on Education, through its Center for Policy Research and Strategy, published *Shared Leadership in Higher Education* by Kezar and Holcombe in 2017. The authors advocated that new forms of leadership are needed in higher education, given the notable challenges colleges and universities are facing. They present a model of shared leadership—not to be confused with shared governance. “Shared leadership, by contrast, is more flexible and identifies various individuals on a campus with relevant experience” (Kezar & Holcombe, 2017). The idea of the requirement for new forms of collaborative leadership was underscored as a way to help institutions be nimble and respond to these challenges. The role of online learning and how it may strategically support the institution is an excellent example of one of these areas that demands change.

Laker (2023) wrote about the approach of multidirectional leadership. Rather than a hierarchical, top-down process, higher education leaders need to function in a matrix or web-style environment, connecting to various groups and promoting shared objectives. Leaders need to look in all directions—up, down, and sideways—and recognize that knowledge and expertise reside at different levels and areas of the institution. We believe this makes sense as higher education does not typically work in a militaristic command and control structure. There is more of an emphasis on engagement and consensus-building when it comes to decision-making. Laker suggests that this collaborative leadership style is more resilient and innovative, and even argues that the inherent feedback loops can lead to faster decision-making.

The Academic Leadership Group (2023) provides higher education leaders with advice about effective leadership styles. They wrote about important aspects of higher education institutions that leaders need to navigate. A few worth noting include shared governance, academic freedom, institutional tradition, and creating a positive and collaborative culture. With that context, they suggest that certain leadership styles are more effective. These include

transformative leadership (where leaders inspire followers by communicating a compelling vision of the future and empower them to embrace innovation and change), servant leadership (where serving the needs of others is prioritized above the self-interest of the leader and trust and respect are emphasized), and spiritual leadership (an approach that integrates values and ethics and a sense of higher purpose). In contrast, certain leadership styles are acknowledged to be less effective. These include transactional leadership (where everything is based on exchanges between leaders and followers) and passive leadership (where leaders take a hands-off approach and provide little direction and guidance to followers) (Academic Leadership Group, 2023).

Another relevant article by Ufomata (2024) promotes the key traits of successful higher education leaders. While twelve characteristics are presented, a few that we would highlight for COLOs include: successful leaders recognize that they cannot do their jobs alone, they acknowledge the complex environment in which they serve, they embrace the mission and values of their university, they understand that there are different centers of power and they need to guide a coalition, the importance of trust in the community, and effective leaders understand the value of a process to make decisions (Ufomata, 2024). An article by Joubert (2020) complements and reinforces the essential qualities of higher education leaders. The eight key skills are financial acumen, collaboration, building new leaders, communication, strategic planning, change management, commitment to diversity, and intellectual curiosity.

One last concept worth noting is institutional isomorphism. The idea refers to the phenomenon of one organization going through a similar transformation as another organization in that same environment (Sakib, 2020). This tendency to mimic other institutions is common in higher education. A frequent activity in colleges and universities that are faced with decisions is to benchmark their peers. We would suggest that the development, proliferation, and positioning of COLOs across the vast majority of colleges and universities in the U.S. aligns with this concept. We believe senior institutional leaders review and consume research articles (such as this one) as a means to inform their local approaches and validate them with the broader higher education community.

UPCEA Competency and Attribute Statements

UPCEA, the professional association for those in professional, continuing, and online (PCO) postsecondary education, developed a competency set for leaders at two- and four-year institutions in the U.S. The competency and attribute statements serve as the foundation for professional development opportunities and other activities within the association.

This was no small task, as the portfolios of professional and online education units are unique to each institution. As such, there are many different roles and organizational attributes for leaders in the field. For this reason, UPCEA identified seventy-five postsecondary associations and other competency sources relevant to specific job tasks and roles found in many professional and online education units. Of the 75 sources reviewed, 19 sources had competency sets available via their organization's website.

After identifying over five hundred multidimensional items from these competency sets, UPCEA team members engaged in a thematic analysis. Eight initial themes emerged throughout the competency sets:

- Critical thinking and decision-making
- Human resource management/higher education leadership
- Information and digital technology
- Integrity and ethics
- Program planning
- Supporting and advocating for constituencies
- Marketing, research, and evaluation
- Partnerships and relationship-building

These themes were validated by the UPCEA network vice-chairs for professional development and the then-titled NCOE professional development subcommittee (later to be known as the Council for Chief Online Learning Officers or C-COLO), various UPCEA members, as well as UPCEA staff members with knowledge of PCO operations.

Once the thematic analysis was completed and validated, the UPCEA team began the content analysis of the 550 items and coded them based on those themes. During the item coding process, three more themes emerged:

- Entrepreneurship/business orientation
- Goal-setting and results-driven
- Administrative tasks.

This yielded eleven themes with over 60 sub-themes and topics. Once coding was complete, the UPCEA team summarized and constructed competency statements. During this process, specific topics were identified as subsets of each statement.

The competency and attribution statements were grouped under headings that aligned with UPCEA's Hallmarks of Excellence in Online Leadership and the Hallmarks of Excellence in Professional and Continuing Education to reflect an alignment between the enterprise-focused and aspirational Hallmarks and the individually focused, specific competency statements. This arrangement of statements does not suggest magnitude or priority but rather an attempt to show the alignment between PCO enterprises and the individuals charged with PCO initiatives.

The UPCEA competency areas and statements were reviewed and validated by various groups within UPCEA (network vice-chairs for professional development, NCOE/C-COLO professional development subcommittee, NCOE/C-COLO advisory board members, select UPCEA members, UPCEA board members, and UPCEA staff members). Four additional sources were suggested by UPCEA's review teams and included during the final competency area and statement reconciliation process. This resulted in 23 sources included in the competency analysis.

The competency areas and statements were last reviewed by the 2022-2023 C-COLO leadership team, composed of Chief Online Learning Officers at leading U.S. postsecondary institutions.

Methods

Data was collected during the summer of 2024. The study reached out to 3,648 individuals, and 521 of them responded to this web-based survey, resulting in a 14% response rate. The survey consisted of 25 multiple-choice questions that used a Likert-type scale and six open-ended questions.

The first section of the survey instrument collected information about the context and current state of online education at the institution. The questions included:

- What is the basic Carnegie classification of your institution?*
- What is your institutional sector?*
- How do you and your institution define the scope of online learning for your position specifically, what modalities of online learning are within your responsibility?*
- How many years ago did your institution create a leadership position for online learning?*
- Whom do you report to?*
- Is your position a member of the following? President's Cabinet / Council, Provost's Cabinet / Council, Dean's Cabinet / Council, Online Learning Committee*
- Has your institution used your online learning efforts as a catalyst for organizational changes?*
- How would you describe the organizational approach to online learning administration and management at your institution?*
- What groups/functions at your institution have been unified/centralized within your organization as a result of institutional efforts with online initiatives?*

The second section of the survey instrument collected information about the background, experience, and skills of the online learning leader. The questions included:

- What is your current title?*
- Were you promoted from within the institution or externally recruited and hired?*
- What was the title of the position you held prior to your current role as Chief Online Learning Officer?*
- What do you envision as your next role or position?*
- How many years have you held this position of leadership for online learning?*
- How many years have you served at your current institution?*
- How many years of experience do you have in higher education?*
- In addition to your leadership role for online learning, do you also hold a faculty appointment?*
- What is the highest degree have you received?*
- Which of the following are field(s) in which you earned a degree?*
- Have you been an online student in a credit-bearing course?*
- How many years of traditional in-person classroom teaching experience do you have?*
- How many years of online teaching experience do you have?*
- How many years of management/leadership experience do you have?*
- How many years of instructional design/curriculum development experience do you have?*

How many years of educational research experience do you have?
How many years of IT (Information Technology) experience do you have?

The third section of the survey instrument collected information about the importance of the COLO Competencies at their institution and their self-assessment relative to those competencies. There are 25 individual items across the following eight categories:

Entrepreneurship, Partnerships and Relationship-Building
Resource Management
Supporting and Advocating for Faculty and Students
Program Planning
Marketing, Research, & Evaluation
Information and Digital Technology
Critical Thinking and Decision Making
Integrity, Ethics, and Professionalism

The fourth and final section of the survey instrument collected information about professional development and networking needs, activities, and challenges.

Which of the following organizations or associations do you or your institution belong to?
How do you stay informed about the state of online learning? (peers, articles, events, research, technologies, vendors, etc.)
Thinking about your own professional development needs, what are the top two topics that you feel would most help you in your current online leadership position?
What is your biggest challenge or barrier with moving online learning initiatives forward at your institution?

Results

The presentation of the results is organized and aligned with the goals and research questions of the study. As noted earlier, this included collecting institutional data for context, gathering information about the professional experience of the leader, and responses regarding the COLO Competencies.

Institutional Context

The initial question in this section captured which sector was associated with the COLO's institution. The results show a good representation of responses across these three sectors. It also enabled deeper analysis, which uncovered potential differences in responses associated with these sectors.

Table 1*Institutional Sector*

What is your institutional sector?	%
Public 2-year	26%
Public 4-year	43%
Private 4-year	30%
Private for-Profit	1%

A foundational question for this study related to how institutions defined the scope of online learning for this leadership position. Basically, where are the boundaries for the responsibilities of the COLO for the academic offerings of the institution? Consistent with prior studies, the responses defy perceptions about a narrow association with distance education. The majority of responses indicated that the responsibilities of the COLO included web-based learning activities and resources integrated into face-to-face courses at the institution.

Table 2*Scope for Online Learning (check all that apply)*

How do you and your institution define the scope of online learning for your position?	%
Fully online courses and programs	90%
Hybrid/blended online courses and programs	81%
Web-based learning activities and resources integrated into face-to-face courses	55%
Other	9%

The study was also interested in the reporting relationship for online learning leaders. More than two-thirds of the respondents stated that they reported to the Provost/Chief Academic Officer or Other Senior Academic Leader of the institution. Consistent with prior studies, it should be noted that only 2% of the leaders reported to the CIO. Once again, this might validate the view that online learning is not an IT function, even if it is reliant on a robust IT platform.

Table 3*Reporting Relationship*

Whom do you report to?	%
President	6%
Provost (Chief Academic Officer)	41%
Other Senior Academic Leader in the Office of the Provost/Academic Affairs	27%
Vice President/Senior Vice President (Outside of Academic Affairs)	7%
CIO (Chief Information Officer)	2%
Dean of a School	9%
Other	7%

In addition to reporting relationships, the study inquired about membership in organizational committees. These types of structures are common to the operations and functions of higher education institutions. The role and visibility of the COLO might also suggest the potential influence of the position at the institution. The results highlight this with over three-fourths of COLOs serving on their Online Learning Committee, about half serving in the Provost's Cabinet, and even one out of five in the President's Cabinet. In hindsight, the authors acknowledge that a "No" response might also include that the committee does not exist at their institution. Adding that as another option might have been more informative.

Table 4*Organizational Committees*

Is your position a member of the following?	Yes	No
President's Cabinet	19%	81%
Provost's Cabinet	49%	51%
Dean's Cabinet	42%	58%
Online Learning Committee	77%	23%

Table 5 captures an important institutional phenomenon: whether COLOs used their online learning efforts as a catalyst for organizational changes. Approximately 60% of COLOs reported they did, which is a lower percentage than seen in previous studies. Analyzing this item by institutional sector did not suggest statistically significant differences.

Table 5*Catalyst for Organizational Change*

Has your institution used your online learning efforts as a catalyst for organizational changes?	%
Yes	61%
No	39%

We also asked COLOs about the general institutional approach to online learning at their institution—basically a centralization or decentralization question. The responses approximated a normal distribution curve, with an even balance as the most cited answer. Analyzing this item by institutional sector revealed that private four-year institutions are slightly more centralized than public four-year institutions.

Table 6*Organizational Approach*

How would you describe the organizational approach to online learning at your institution?	%
Completely Centralized	10%
Most functions are centralized	28%
An even balance of centralization and decentralization	31%
Most functions are decentralized	25%
Completely Decentralized	7%

The last item the study explored was associated with organizational change. If this happened at their institution, the study asked what groups had been unified with the COLO. Certain units were noted more frequently than others. More than half of the respondents identified Instructional Design, Learning Management Systems, Online Learning Policy Development, Academic/Educational Technology, and Faculty Development and Training as being unified under their leadership. This is consistent with prior studies, with the exception that Course Design and Multimedia Development were only noted by 43% of COLOs in 2024. Breaking this down by the institutional sector revealed one very slight difference—only 49% of COLOs at public 4-year schools had responsibility for Faculty Development.

Table 7*What Groups Were Unified?*

What groups at your institution have been unified within your organization?	%
Instructional Design	74%
Learning Management Systems	68%
Online Learning Policy Development	60%
Academic/Educational Technology	56%
Faculty Development and Training	52%
Course Design and Multimedia Development	43%
Center for Teaching and Learning	36%
Faculty IT Support	34%
Library Support for Faculty	21%
Marketing	21%
Student Services	20%
Advising	14%
Not applicable—there have been no changes to our organization	8%
Educational Research	7%

The Personal Background, Experience, and Skills of COLOs

To start this section, we asked respondents whether they were promoted from within the institution or externally recruited. Approximately 60% of COLOs indicated that they were promoted from within their institution. This result was consistent across institutional sectors.

Table 8*Internal or External*

Were you promoted from within the institution or externally recruited and hired?	%
Promoted from within the same institution	59%
Externally recruited and hired	41%

The next area of inquiry related to COLO titles was solicited as open-ended questions that were coded into several title categories. The first question asked the COLO about their current title, and the top response was “Director,” and the second response was “Associate/Assistant Vice President/Provost.”

Breaking this down by institutional sector revealed some modest differences. Public and private four-year institutions cited “Associate/Assistant Vice President/Provost” as the number two response, more than their public 2-year counterparts, who noted “Dean” as their second choice.

Table 9

Current Title

What is your current title?	%
Director	30%
Associate/Assistant Vice President/Provost	16%
Dean	12%
Vice President/Provost	11%
Senior/Executive Director	10%
Coordinator	5%
Other	5%
Associate/Assistant Dean	4%
Associate/Assistant Director	3%
COLO	3%
Faculty	2%
Manager	1%
President/Provost	1%

COLOs were then asked about their previous role. “Director” was the title most COLOs referenced for their position before their current role, and a faculty title was the second most cited response.

Breaking this down by the institutional sector again yielded some insightful differences. Private 4-year institutions cited Associate/Assistant Vice President/Provost as their number two response, more than their public four-year and two-year counterparts, who noted a faculty title as their second choice.

Table 10

Prior Title

What was the title of the position you held prior to your current role as Chief Online Learning Officer?	%
Director	26%
Faculty	14%
Instructional Design	10%
Associate/Assistant Vice President/Provost	9%
Dean	9%
Associate/Assistant Dean	6%
Associate/Assistant Director	6%
Senior/Executive Director	6%
Other	5%
Coordinator	4%
Manager	3%
IT	3%
Vice President/Provost	2%
COLO	1%
President/Provost	1%

The third open-ended question in this area asked COLOs about their next role or position. “Vice President/Provost” was most referenced by COLOs as the title of the position they held before their current role. The second most noted role by COLOs, perhaps initially surprising, was “Retirement.” The third choice, “Dean,” was followed by the fourth, “Associate/Assistant Vice President/Provost.” We want to highlight that the fifth response was coded as “happy.” The responses aligned to this choice spoke about their contentment and happiness with their current position and a desire to remain. The tenth response, “a new institution,” should also be noted.

Institutional presidents and provosts should recognize that the retirement (14%) and new institution (4%) replies may mean that almost one out of five COLOs will soon be leaving their current position, and institutions would do well to consider retention, recruitment, or internal development and succession strategies.

Breaking this down by the institutional sector yielded some differences. Private four-year institutions cited “happy” as their number two response, more than their public four-year and two-year counterparts, who noted “retirement” as their second choice.

Table 11

Next Position

What do you envision as your next role or position?	%
Vice President/Provost	17%
Retirement	14%
Dean	14%
Associate/Assistant Vice President/Provost	11%
Happy	10%
President/Provost	9%
Director	8%
COLO	6%
Other	5%
New Institution	4%
Senior/Executive Director	4%
Faculty	3%
Associate/Assistant Dean	2%
IT	1%

The study captured the length of service in higher education. More than half of COLOs have worked in higher education for at least 16 years, and 40% have worked in higher education for more than 20 years.

Table 12*Time in Higher Education*

How many years of experience do you have in higher education?	%
Less than 1	13%
1–5	11%
6–10	9%
11–15	11%
16–20	15%
20+	40%

Given the importance of relatable experience and the value of peer relationships, the study asked whether the COLO also held a faculty appointment. More than 40% of COLOs said yes (16% tenure or tenure track and 25% non-tenure track), and 59% said no. We investigated this item by institutional sector, and some differences were statistically significant. Private four-year COLOs were much more likely (51%) to hold a faculty appointment than their public four-year (42%) and public two-year (19%) peers. Mintzberg (1979) emphasized the importance of this issue: “Full-time administrators who wish to have any power at all in these structures must be certified members of the profession, and preferably be elected by the professional operators or at least appointed with their blessing.” This breakdown by institutional sector was consistent with prior studies. We should note that we did not ask if the COLO held a faculty appointment prior to becoming COLO.

Table 13*Faculty Appointment*

In addition to your leadership role for online learning, do you also hold a faculty appointment?	%
Yes—Tenure or tenure track professor	16%
Yes—Non-tenure track professor	25%
No	59%

We also asked about the academic credentials of the COLO. Most (56%) COLOs have earned a doctoral degree, with 35% with PhDs and 21% with EdDs. This result was consistent with prior studies.

Table 14*Academic Credentials*

What is the highest degree you have received?	%
PhD	35%
EdD	21%
Other	10%
MBA	9%
MA/MS	3%
MPA	1%
BA/BS	1%
JD	1%
MD	0%

The question about academic credentials was followed by a query about the fields of those degrees. While this was a “check all that apply” question, by far, the most cited discipline was education, with 60% of COLOs. This result was consistent with prior studies.

Table 15*Academic Disciplines*

Which of the following are field(s) in which you earned a degree? (check all that apply)	%
Education	60%
Social Sciences	23%
Humanities	22%
Business	19%
Other	17%
Computer Science/IT	12%
Natural Science	5%

Healthcare	4%
Engineering	3%

The authors have long believed that direct, first-hand experience as an online student can be very valuable. The vast majority (79%) of COLOs have been online students, with one out of three earning a complete online degree. When analyzed by the institutional sector, we did see that public two-year COLOs were slightly more likely (85%) to have experience as an online student as compared to their four-year counterparts (76%).

Table 16

Online Student

Have you been an online student? (credit-bearing)	%
Yes—I have taken one online course as a student	14%
Yes—I have taken multiple courses as a student	33%
Yes—I have earned a completely online degree program as a student	32%
No	21%

In prior studies, we found that COLOs often have a rich blend of a variety of professional experiences. We believe this is very valuable in their ability to collaborate and work with various constituent groups across their campuses, so we investigated these areas again. This also aligns with the work of Nworie (2012), who acknowledged the differences in leadership in the field of online distance education.

The first area centered on management and leadership experience. Responses showed that 65% of COLOs have eleven or more years of management and leadership experience (see Table 17, below).

Table 17

Leadership Experience

How many years of <u>management/leadership</u> experience do you have?	%
I do not have any	1%
Less than 1	1%
1–5	14%

6–10	21%
11–15	23%
16–20	16%
20+	26%

The second area inquired about experience with instructional design and curriculum development. The response was that most respondents had more than 11 or more years of instructional design and curriculum development experience.

Table 18

Instructional Design Experience

How many years of <u>Instructional Design / Curriculum Development</u> experience do you have?	%
I do not have any	7%
Less than 1	2%
1–5	14%
6–10	24%
11–15	19%
16–20	18%
20+	17%

The third area concerns online teaching. The response was that 70% of COLOs have taught online for at least six years.

Table 19

Online Teaching Experience

How many years of <u>online teaching</u> experience do you have?	%
I do not have any	6%
Less than 1	5%
1–5	19%

6–10	27%
11–15	17%
16–20	15%
20+	11%

The fourth area was traditional face-to-face classroom teaching. Table 20 below shows that two out of three COLOs have six or more years of traditional face-to-face teaching experience.

Table 20

Face-to-face Teaching Experience

How many years of traditional <u>face-to-face classroom teaching</u> experience do you have?	%
I do not have any	8%
Less than 1	5%
1–5	19%
6–10	21%
11–15	13%
16–20	11%
20+	22%

The fifth area asked about educational research experience. The response was that most leaders had six or more years of educational research experience.

Table 21

Educational Research Experience

How many years of <u>Educational Research</u> experience do you have?	%
I do not have any	15%
Less than 1	5%
1–5	23%

6–10	22%
11–15	14%
16–20	8%
20+	12%

The final question in this section asked about Information Technology experience. It should be noted that 35% of the leaders did not have any IT experience, and only 30% had more than 10 years. This result is consistent with prior studies and might again indicate that online learning is not an IT function, even if it clearly relies on our IT colleagues for a robust and stable platform.

Table 22

IT Experience

How many years of <u>IT (Information Technology)</u> experience do you have?	%
I do not have any	35%
Less than 1	4%
1–5	16%
6–10	14%
11–15	10%
16–20	7%
20+	13%

COLO Competencies

The survey included questions focused on the competencies necessary to do the work of COLOs. The researchers sought to establish the importance of specific competencies and attributes to the role of COLO, potentially further validating UPCEA’s competency and attribute statements. Additionally, the researchers wanted to determine the degree to which COLOs believed they possessed these competencies and attributes. As this study also addresses the professional development of COLOs, any discussion of self-identified professional development must begin with a needs self-assessment.

For the purposes of this research study, the competency and attributes items were clustered into eleven areas, arranged by their importance and the level of skill respondents possess.

- Guiding the Online Enterprise (four survey items)

- Relationships (two items)
- Integrity and Professionalism (two items)
- Governance and Compliance (two items)
- Organizational and Operational Considerations (two items)
- Inclusive Environments (two items)
- Curriculum and Faculty/SMEs (two items)
- Financial Models and Entrepreneurship (two items)
- Marshalling Resources (three items)
- Attracting Learners (three items)
- Facilities (one item)

Guiding the Online Enterprise

With regard to the competencies and attributes focused on the leadership of the online enterprise, respondents indicated these items were both very important, and they possessed these competencies and attributes.

Table 23

Guiding the Online Enterprise—Four Items

Thinks strategically with flexibility and creativity (n = 368, 359)			
Very Important	86%	Very Skilled	83%
Somewhat Important	11%	Somewhat Skilled	16%
Not Important	3%	Needs Improvement	1%
Engages in evidence-based decision-making, which often requires collaboration and consensus building (n = 367, 359)			
Very Important	84%	Very Skilled	76%
Somewhat Important	14%	Somewhat Skilled	23%
Not Important	2%	Needs Improvement	1%
Engages in analytical & critical thinking for the purposes of evaluation, reflection, and analysis (n = 368, 359)			
Very Important	85%	Very Skilled	81%
Somewhat Important	13%	Somewhat Skilled	19%
Not Important	2%	Needs Improvement	0%

Models effective leadership and demonstrates a willingness to provide direction and communicate a vision for your enterprise (n = 358, 347)

Very Important	84%	Very Skilled	78%
Somewhat Important	14%	Somewhat Skilled	20%
Not Important	2%	Needs Improvement	2%

Relationships

Similarly, respondents felt that building relationships, both within the online enterprise team and outside the team with internal and external institutional constituencies, was important to the role of a COLO. Most respondents felt they were very skilled in both efforts, yet for the item focused on building internal and external constituency relationships as well as representing their perspectives to these constituencies, around a third of the respondents indicated they were only “somewhat skilled.”

Table 24

Relationships—Two Items

Motivates and develops team members for the purposes of creating trust as well as building and retaining a dynamic team of professionals (n = 371, 362)

Very Important	83%	Very Skilled	76%
Somewhat Important	14%	Somewhat Skilled	23%
Not Important	3%	Needs Improvement	1%

Builds internal and external relationships that support your initiatives and the institution, representing your perspectives to internal and external constituencies. (n = 374, 360)

Very Important	80%	Very Skilled	65%
Somewhat Important	16%	Somewhat Skilled	32%
Not Important	4%	Needs Improvement	3%

Integrity and Professionalism

Once again, we see that respondents felt these items were of greatest importance to COLOs, and likewise, respondents felt they possessed these competencies and attributes.

Table 25*Integrity and Professionalism—Two Items*

Adheres to professional and personal standards and/or demonstrates conduct reflective of the ethics and theories in your enterprise and higher education in general (n = 359, 346)

Very Important	84%	Very Skilled	88%
Somewhat Important	16%	Somewhat Skilled	12%
Not Important	0%	Needs Improvement	0%

Demonstrates broadly accepted personal and professional attributes, often described as soft skills, found in good team members regardless of position or role in your enterprise (n = 357, 346)

Very Important	82%	Very Skilled	81%
Somewhat Important	16%	Somewhat Skilled	19%
Not Important	2%	Needs Improvement	0%

Governance and Compliance

Again, respondents indicated the two items focused on governance and compliance were very important to the role of COLOs. Interestingly, for the item, “understands the laws, regulations, policies, governance, and institutional contexts relevant to your position and experience,” respondents were less sure of their skills in this area, with nearly half indicating they were only “somewhat skilled.” Given the fact that this survey was in the field during a period when the Biden Administration’s Education Department was in the midst of negotiated rulemaking, the anticipated changes, when paired with the possibility of change in the administration in January 2025, could have fed some of the lack of confidence the 53% “somewhat skilled”/“needs improvement” responses indicate.

Table 26*Governance and Compliance—Two Items*

Understands the laws, regulations, policies, governance, and institutional contexts relevant to your position and experience (n = 373, 364)

Very Important	78%	Very Skilled	48%
Somewhat Important	20%	Somewhat Skilled	46%

Not Important	2%	Needs Improvement	6%
Engages in inductive and deductive reasoning for the purposes of forming rules, policies, or conclusions or apply existing rules or policies to arrive at conclusions (n = 367, 356)			
Very Important	72%	Very Skilled	72%
Somewhat Important	24%	Somewhat Skilled	27%
Not Important	4%	Needs Improvement	1%

Organizational and Operational Considerations

Again, we see that respondents felt the two competencies and attributes aligned with their organization and operations were important to COLOs, and most indicated they were very skilled in these areas.

Table 27

Organizational and Operational Considerations—Two Items

Manages overall operational resources for the purpose of achieving optimal organizational performance (n = 373, 362)			
Very Important	77%	Very Skilled	63%
Somewhat Important	18%	Somewhat Skilled	36%
Not Important	5%	Needs Improvement	1%
Engages in active learning to stay current with trends, stakeholder needs, and operational improvements (n = 356, 348)			
Very Important	78%	Very Skilled	75%
Somewhat Important	19%	Somewhat Skilled	23%
Not Important	3%	Needs Improvement	2%

Inclusive Environments

With regard to navigating complex and sensitive situations, respondents felt both were important and that they possessed these skills. While the importance of the second item, focused on their ability to facilitate diverse, inclusive, and culturally sensitive working and learning

environments, was of similar importance, a large percentage of respondents questioned their own skill level by responding “somewhat skilled” and “need improvement” (42%).

Table 28

Inclusive Environments—Two items

Navigates and/or resolves complex and sensitive situations (n = 368, 358)			
Very Important	79%	Very Skilled	71%
Somewhat Important	19%	Somewhat Skilled	27%
Not Important	2%	Needs Improvement	2%
Possesses social perceptiveness and orientation to facilitate diverse, inclusive, and culturally sensitive working and learning environments to serve global audiences (n = 357, 344)			
Very Important	73%	Very Skilled	58%
Somewhat Important	24%	Somewhat Skilled	39%
Not Important	3%	Needs Improvement	3%

Curriculum and Faculty/Subject Matter Experts (SMEs)

Most respondents recognized the importance of curriculum design and theories in their work as chief online learning officers. While most (69%) felt this knowledge was important to their roles, they were more confident in their abilities, with 73% indicating they were very skilled in these areas. Recruiting, retaining, and developing subject matter experts had more modest results in that just over half of the respondents indicated this was important to their role, and less than half (42%) felt they were very skilled in this area. This notable deviation from previous items might be indicative of the varying degrees to which COLOs have the opportunity to select SMEs and provide those experts with professional development. As noted in UPCEA’s 2024 *Benchmarking Online Enterprises Survey (BONES)*, 53% of respondents indicated their online unit was academically decentralized, “defined as faculty, programs, and courses emanating from multiple academic departments or units for online programs” (Uranis, Ives, Etter, & Sullberg, 2024).

Table 29

Curriculum and Faculty/Subject Matter Experts (SMEs)—Two Items

Understands curriculum design, sourcing, and revisions inclusive of learning strategies and theories for the purposes of delivering instruction and supporting programmatic outcomes and objectives for your programs (n = 370, 362)
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Very Important	69%	Very Skilled	73%
Somewhat Important	27%	Somewhat Skilled	24%
Not Important	4%	Needs Improvement	3%
Marshal necessary support to identify, recruit, retain, and develop subject matter experts/faculty for your programs (n = 370, 356)			
Very Important	50%	Very Skilled	42%
Somewhat Important	27%	Somewhat Skilled	49%
Not Important	23%	Needs Improvement	9%

Financial Models & Entrepreneurship

Like recruiting and retaining SMEs, respondents may have varying amounts of influence on the financial models and entrepreneurial activities of their online units. As can be inferred by UPCEA's 2024 BOnES items focused on the online enterprise's financial conditions, respondents in this study may not have the need to explore the implications of financial models, revenue sources, and budgeting simply because that opportunity is not open to them. For this reason, the lack of skill in these areas, only 43% and 44%, respectively, seem reasonable and more indicative of individual COLO circumstances and experience than professional deficiencies.

Table 30

Financial Models and Entrepreneurship—Two Items

Understands the implications of financial models, revenue sources, and higher education budgeting processes relevant to the fiscal management of your unit (n = 372, 362)			
Very Important	66%	Very Skilled	43%
Somewhat Important	28%	Somewhat Skilled	45%
Not Important	6%	Needs Improvement	12%
Uses an entrepreneurial mindset and business acumen to guide your initiatives (n = 373, 353)			
Very Important	55%	Very Skilled	44%
Somewhat Important	38%	Somewhat Skilled	47%

Not Important	7%	Needs Improvement	9%
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Marshalling Resources

Similar to the financial models and entrepreneurship items, planning, executing, and evaluating programs as well as information management/digital technology may be outside the portfolios of respondents, noting the researchers' earlier assertions that each online unit's portfolio is unique. The online leader may not be involved in academic programming and faculty development. Likewise, the institution's centralized IT department may be charged with supporting the technology needs of the online enterprise. These nuances in organizational structure and responsibilities likely influenced the respondents' survey answers.

Table 31

Marshalling Resources—Three Items

Plans, executes, and evaluates programs relevant to your enterprise and initiatives (n = 371, 361)			
Very Important	64%	Very Skilled	62%
Somewhat Important	31%	Somewhat Skilled	34%
Not Important	5%	Needs Improvement	4%
Possesses functional and operational knowledge of information management and digital technology in the support of your enterprise (n = 371, 359)			
Very Important	61%	Very Skilled	56%
Somewhat Important	35%	Somewhat Skilled	38%
Not Important	4%	Needs Improvement	6%
Manages human resources for the purposes of hiring and employing staff to create a productive workplace. (n = 370, 356)			
Very Important	56%	Very Skilled	56%
Somewhat Important	30%	Somewhat Skilled	39%
Not Important	14%	Needs Improvement	5%

Attracting Learners

While Table 10 details respondents' previous title, it does not distinguish specific areas, such as marketing. Rather, it does suggest some specific areas, such as instructional design (online unit) and faculty (academic affairs). Lacking insights into the specific areas and acknowledging the anecdotal information acquired through years of working in online education, the researchers can only surmise that most online leaders lack skills in recruitment, retention, and marketing efforts because their previous roles did not require that of them. Further, once they ascend to the role of COLO, they have a team of professionals skilled in these areas. Additional research in this area may be warranted.

Table 32

Attracting Learners—Three Items

Facilitate necessary support to identify, recruit, and retain students/participants in your programs (n = 370, 356)			
Very Important	53%	Very Skilled	37%
Somewhat Important	27%	Somewhat Skilled	50%
Not Important	20%	Needs Improvement	13%
Uses market research and prospective student/participant needs to guide marketing activities and aspects of program delivery (n = 371, 358)			
Very Important	41%	Very Skilled	25%
Somewhat Important	37%	Somewhat Skilled	55%
Not Important	22%	Needs Improvement	20%
Possesses an understanding of the marketing strategies and principles appropriate for your programming and consistent with the professional's role in your enterprise (n = 367, 355)			
Very Important	41%	Very Skilled	25%
Somewhat Important	40%	Somewhat Skilled	52%
Not Important	19%	Needs Improvement	23%

Facilities

The lack of importance and lack of skill in the area of facilities management seems valid at its face, since online learning is a digital environment, often lacking the same brick and mortar

obligations that may exist in other areas of professional and continuing education. The researchers can only guess that these numbers would be impacted if the definition of facilities were to include the digital spaces and learning management systems used by online enterprises to deliver educational opportunities. Yet in being that liberal with the definition, the researchers could have ultimately confused respondents. As with the previous area, attracting learners, more research may be needed.

Table 33

Facilities—One Item

Manages facilities for the purposes of recruiting and delivering educational opportunities. (n = 370, 257)

Very Important	26%	Very Skilled	4%
Somewhat Important	42%	Somewhat Skilled	82%
Not Important	32%	Needs Improvement	14%

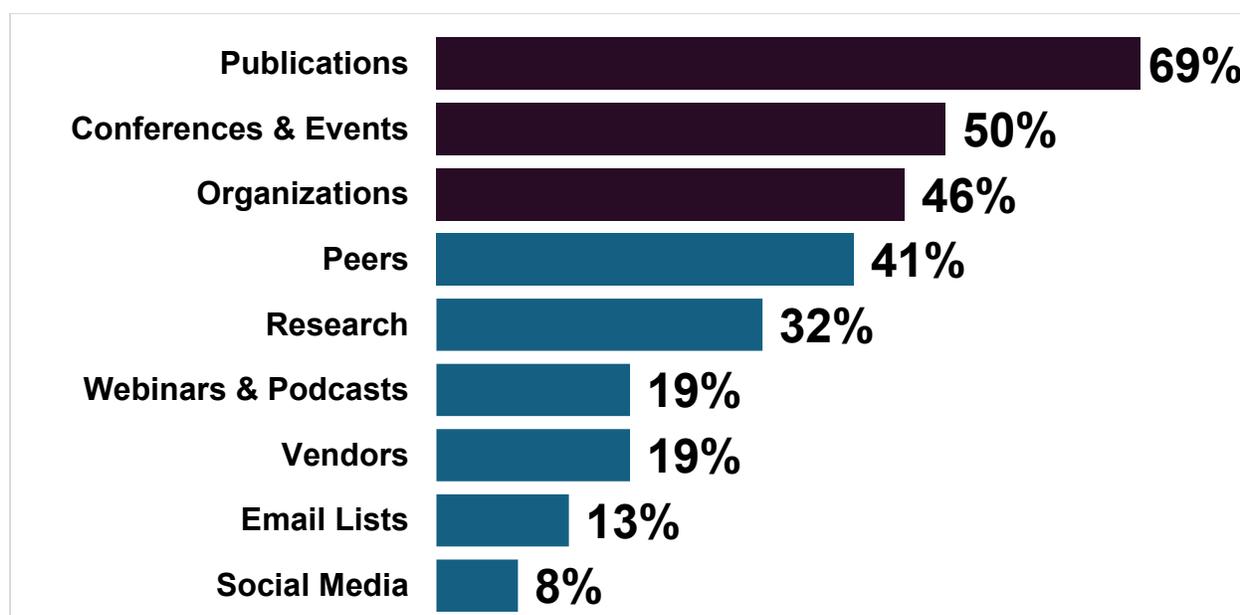
Staying Informed as the Chief Online Learning Officer

The last section of the study examined ways that COLOs stay up-to-date with online learning practices and policies, from engaging with professional development to staying connected to organizations and resources that inform online strategies and practices.

First, we asked COLOs how they stay informed about online learning. Nearly 70% cited relevant publications as a major way of staying informed, while half of the respondents also highlighted engaging with online conferences and events (see Figure 1 below).

Figure 1

How COLOs Stay Informed About Online-related Topics (n = 308)



Breaking it down by institutional type did reveal some differences. Both public and private four-year institutions prioritized publications (73% of respondents in both these sectors indicated they used publications to stay informed), while only 57% of COLOs at public two-year institutions said the same. Public community college COLOs had a near-equal investment in conferences and events (58%) and online-related organizations (59%), with the latter showing a deeper connection to organizations than either public four-year institutions (44%) or private four-year institutions (39%).

Next, we did a deeper dive into online-related organizations, asking COLOs which organizations they currently belonged to or might join in the future. The top five organizations that COLOs or their institutions belonged to were: Quality Matters (QM) (67%), EDUCAUSE (64%), the Online Learning Consortium (OLC) (58%), UPCEA (44%), and WCET (41%). COLOs had the opportunity to also indicate if they were currently a member but might drop the membership, as well as if they had no intention of joining the organization in the near future (see Table 34).

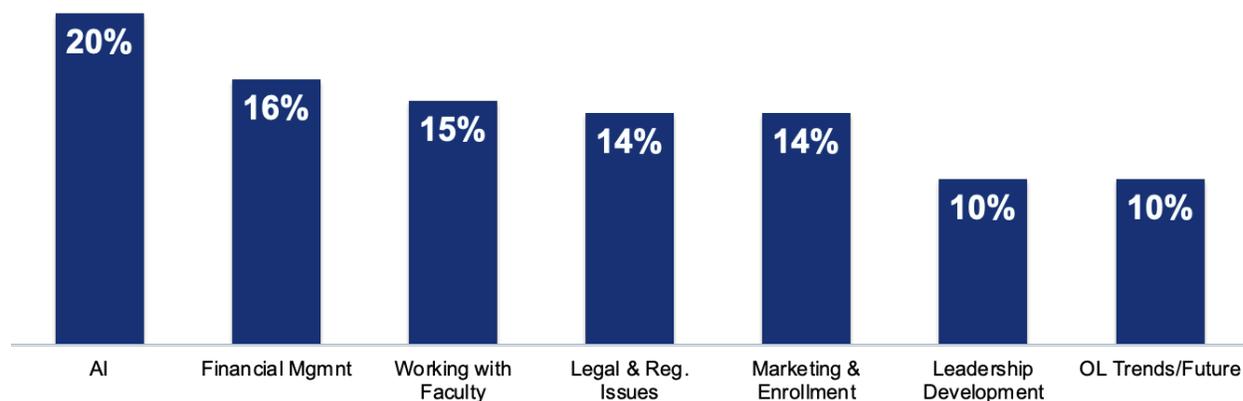
Table 34*Associations*

Which of the following organizations or associations do you or your institution belong? (check all that apply)	Yes	Yes—but might drop	No—but might join	No
QM	67%	3%	8%	21%
EDUCAUSE	64%	4%	8%	24%
OLC	58%	5%	12%	25%
UPCEA	44%	1%	9%	47%
WCET	41%	2%	18%	39%
USDLA	15%	3%	16%	66%
ISTE	10%	1%	11%	77%
AECT	9%	2%	12%	76%
League for Innovation	9%	1%	7%	83%

In terms of most-needed topics for their own professional development, COLOs indicated that information on AI would be the most helpful (20%), followed by financial management (16%), and working well with faculty (15%) (see Figure 2).

Figure 2

Most Helpful Professional Development Topics Identified by COLOs (n = 308)



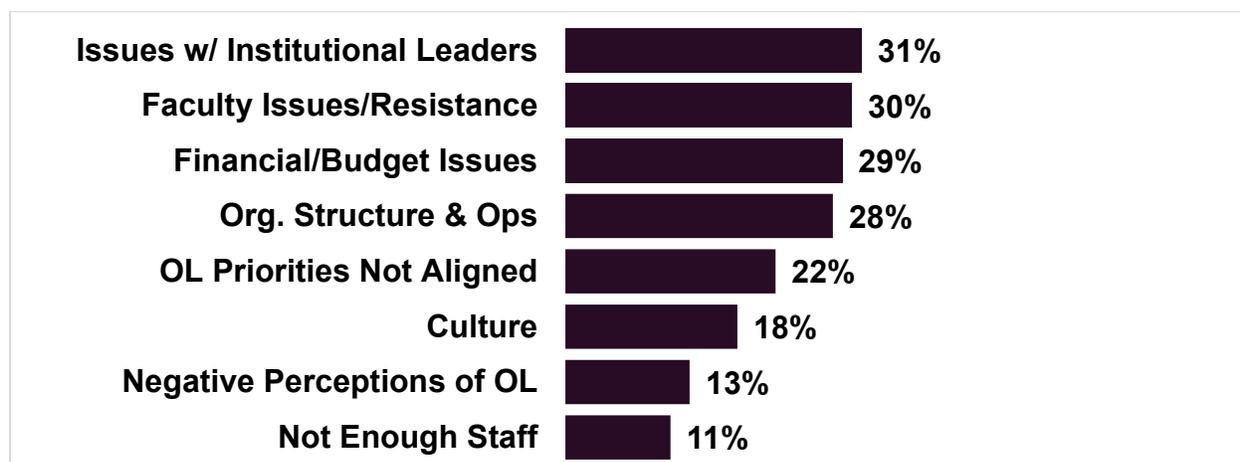
Open-ended comments for this question highlighted the need for continuing education on emerging issues and challenges, especially at the intersection of academics and policy. AI is one such topic, but change management was also frequently mentioned, especially in the complex context of the COLO role, which often must bridge the gap between online learning staff and senior administration who may lack specific knowledge about online strategies and scaling.

Institutional Barriers to Online Initiatives

As a final topic, COLOs were asked about common challenges and barriers encountered when trying to advance or scale online initiatives. Several challenges were experienced by COLOs to a relatively equal degree—approximately 30% of respondents identified issues with institutional leadership, issues with faculty, financial issues, and an organizational structure or operations that were not well-aligned with moving online projects forward (see Figure 3).

Figure 3

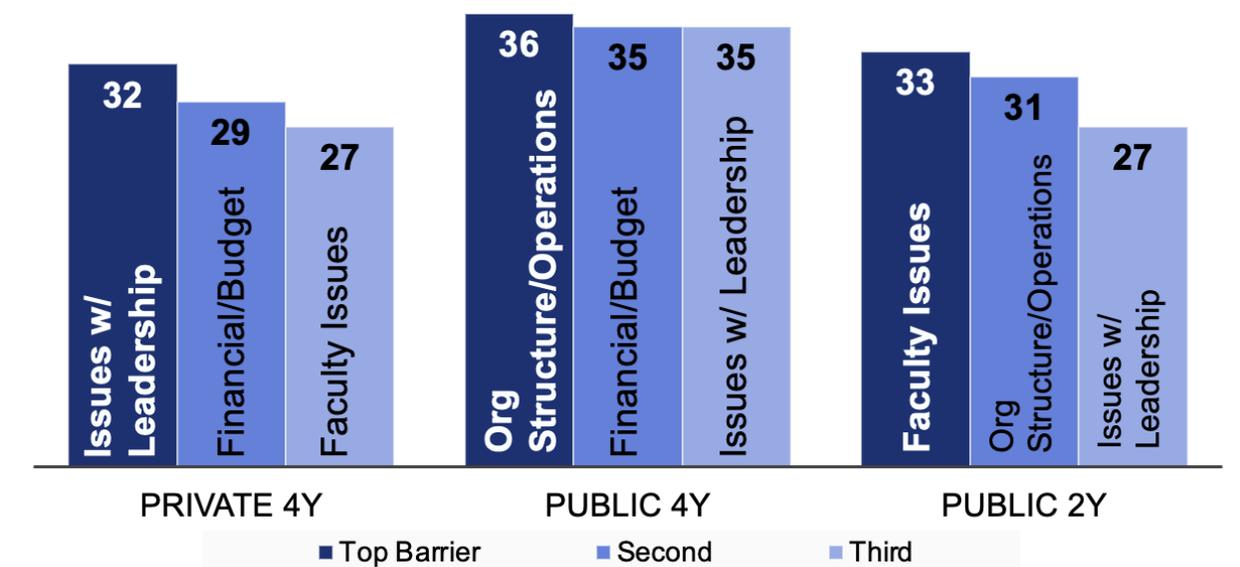
Challenges and Barriers to Moving Online Initiatives Forward (n = 319)



Similar to the variety of ways that COLOs stay informed, data revealed differences by institutional type when looking at the top three identified issues. While all sectors included “issues with institutional leaders,” their placement varied (see Figure 4).

Figure 4

Top Challenges/barriers Vary by Institutional Type (n = 319)



Open-ended comments for this question revealed the unique impact of institutional culture and context. For example, issues around centralized support and faculty autonomy received several comments, including how the interaction of these aspects often caused campus tensions. Institutional culture was identified as an issue in terms of serving on-ground “versus”

online learners, a lack of prioritization for online staffing or support even with online initiatives, and undermining leadership efforts due to reporting lines not extending to senior leadership.

Key Findings

The bulleted list below provides two summarized lists of the key findings of this study broken down by those associated with the individual COLO and those with the institution.

Summary of findings related to the individual COLO:

- The majority of COLOs have more than 16 years of HE experience
- More than 40% of COLOs have a faculty appointment
- The majority of COLOs have doctoral degrees
- Approximately 3/5 COLOs were promoted from within their institution
- 1 out of 7 COLOs indicated that their next step will be retirement
- Almost 80% of COLOs have been online students—with 1/3 completing a fully online degree
- Most COLOs indicated that they are very skilled in the UPCEA COLO Competencies that they say are important to their school
- Publications, Events, Organizations, and Peers are most cited by COLOs for staying informed about Online Learning
- The topics most mentioned by COLOs for their professional development include AI, Financial Management, Working with Faculty, Legal and Regulatory Issues, and Marketing/Enrollment.

Summary of findings related to the COLO's institution:

- Director/Exec Director and VP/AVP are the most common titles
- More than 2/3 report to the Provost or other senior academic leader
- The vast majority have responsibility for fully online, hybrid online, and web-enhanced online courses
- ID, LMS, OL Policy Development, Academic Tech, and Faculty Development are the functions most likely to be unified with the COLO
- Online learning at most institutions has been a catalyst for organizational changes
- QM, EDUCAUSE, OLC, UPCEA, and WCET are the associations most noted by COLOs as having institutional memberships
- The biggest challenges identified by COLOs at their institution are Issues with Institutional Leaders, Faculty Issues, Financial and Budgeting Issues, Organizational Structure & Operations, and OL Priorities not aligned.

Discussion

This study provided a much-needed update to the profile and role of the chief online learning officer at U.S. higher education institutions and highlighted specific areas for COLOs to lead campus conversations relative to online learning leadership and strategy.

Impact on the Institution

For decades, many higher education institutions have understood the value of online learning to enhance access. During the pandemic, virtually all institutions embraced online learning as a means for academic continuity. Now, with the experience of the past five years, most colleges and universities are assessing the ongoing role of this modality to pursue opportunities for new markets and revenue growth. They understand the dynamic environment in which they operate and the challenges they are facing. One key factor related to institutions navigating these choppy waters is what happens to student enrollment. We believe that online learning will play a key role in retention and growth, and that is why this research is so valuable to higher education executives. It is vital to the future of their college or university to be organized for success, strategically embrace online learning initiatives, and identify and support a leader to guide these endeavors. They must have someone who has the right skills and experience and knows what they are doing.

One example for institutional leaders to consider relates to COLO positioning. This research recognizes that senior online learning leaders span a wide spectrum, with the majority reporting to the Provost or Chief Academic Officer or another Senior Academic leader. However, this area received some attention in the open comments, with several COLOs sharing difficulties in moving initiatives forward when they did not have communication lines with senior leadership. Although 61% of respondents reported that online learning efforts served as a catalyst for institutional change, only 19% reported membership in the President’s Cabinet, and slightly less than half (49%) reported membership in the Provost’s Cabinet. Additionally, the most common title reported was “Director” (30%) followed by “Associated/Assistant VP/Provost” (16%), showing a stark difference in terms of institutional “power”—directors of online, for example, must master “leading from the middle” and can be disconnected from senior leadership, often limiting their impact, scope, and autonomy. Institutions would be well served to examine who the senior-most online leader is at the institutional level and whether the position is elevated (or supported) enough to provide strategic leadership.

Impact on the Individual COLO

Regardless of the title, the COLO role is a portrait of deep knowledge and experience with both higher education in general and online learning specifically. A plurality (40%) had more than 20 years of higher education experience, and more than half had either a PhD or EdD. Most COLOs (79%) had taken at least one online course as a student, and most have both online and face-to-face teaching experience. While years of leadership experience varied widely, this data point may be revealing the different “levels” of leadership/titles as discussed above. We hope this study will help impact COLOs through self-assessment of the variety of skills and experience needed to be successful. They can benchmark with their peers through this research and identify the professional development required for their personal career plans. Higher education associations like QM, OLC, UPCEA, and EDUCAUSE might consider this research as they plan and offer professional development opportunities for our COLO colleagues.

This research was the first national study that considered the UPCEA COLO Competencies. In terms of those competencies, skills around leadership, strategic thinking, relationship-building, operational management, and institutional governance emerged as very important to the COLO role, while some areas that are equally vital to leading online, such as

fiscal management, business acumen, enterprise solutions, information management, and growing enrollment, varied in terms of importance (and self-assessed skill). COLOs might use this data to do a deeper assessment of what competencies and skills should be valued at the institution to empower the COLO role and move online initiatives forward, as well as professional development opportunities that would help grow their acumen in these areas. The landscape of US higher education in general, and online learning specifically, is increasingly complex and competitive, and those who are leading online efforts may need to be their own visionaries.

The data also revealed that COLOs recognize the complex challenges of their role and make it a point to stay informed and connected in a variety of ways. Even as they expand their own knowledge and skill set, however, limitations are often imposed on their effectiveness due to a lack of appropriate staff and budget, a lack of a direct connection to senior leadership, or tensions around institutional mission and culture—all of which can impact their ability to lead effectively. COLOs who are in higher leadership positions might seize the opportunity to create a unified strategy that encompasses, rather than divides, on-ground and online students, while those leading from the middle may do well to form and lead collaborative committees that can better connect them with senior leadership and strategy discussions around online initiatives.

Limitations

The authors acknowledge that this research is limited by participants who provided data about themselves and their institutions. While we are extremely grateful that more than 500 COLOs contributed to this study, it does represent a modest 14% of the individuals who were invited to participate. Even though the findings might be of interest in other countries, another consideration is that this research was focused on higher education in the United States.

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