

# Exclusively Online Students

March 2021

Benchmarking

Undergraduate Enrollment

Total Enrollment

Changes Over Time

## Background

As the University of Alabama System (UAS) prepares to recalibrate and understand the changing needs of its students post-pandemic, one important area of focus is gaining a better understanding of how instructional needs may be changing for current and prospective UAS students. Although many students were required to shift to hybrid or fully remote instructional delivery methodologies during the 2020-21 academic year as a result of social distancing guidelines and other health and safety concerns, even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, UAS institutions were showing signs of an increasing number of exclusively online students.

This analysis provides an opportunity for UA System stakeholders to compare the recent (Spring 2021) *exclusively online* enrollment of its campuses with benchmark data available via the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). Within this analysis, as with recent System reports on the same topic, *exclusively online students* are defined as those enrolled exclusively in “distance education” courses, based on the [IPEDS definition](#).<sup>1</sup>

The number of exclusively online students (or students enrolled exclusively in distance education courses) is reported each fall to IPEDS. At this time, the latest information available for download for all institutions is as of fall 2019. For the purposes of this analysis, the following data elements are included:

- The number and share of students enrolled exclusively online at UAS institutions as compared to the same number and share at [Southern University Group \(SUG\)](#) institutions. SUG is a group of 31 public institutions that are

frequently included as peer institutions for benchmarking by UA. (UA and UAB are part of SUG, while UAH is included for comparison purposes only.)

- Changes in the number and share of students enrolled exclusively online over the period of eight years—from fall 2012 to fall 2019.
- Comparison of changes in the number and share of exclusively online students over time at UAS institutions to the median changes in the number and share of exclusively online students for the SUG institutions.

## Undergraduate Enrollment

As shown in Graph 1, in fall 2019 there were 32,795 undergraduate students at UA; 13,836 undergraduate students at UAB; and 7,989 undergraduate students at UAH. The numbers/percentages of exclusively online undergraduate students on UAS campuses were: 2,856 (8.7% of all undergraduate students) at UA; 2,398 (17.3%) at UAB; and 241 (3.0%) at UAH.

In Graph 1, institutions are sorted based on the percentage of students enrolled exclusively online. When compared to other SUG institutions, UAB ranks # 1 based on the percentage of undergraduate students enrolled exclusively online; UA ranks # 3; and UAH ranks # 12. Overall, these data show that more undergraduate students enroll exclusively online at UAB and at UA than at many other SUG institutions.

## All Student Enrollment

As shown in Graph 2, in fall of 2019 there were 38,100 students at UA; 22,080 students at UAB; and 9,988 students at UAH. The numbers/percentages of exclusively online

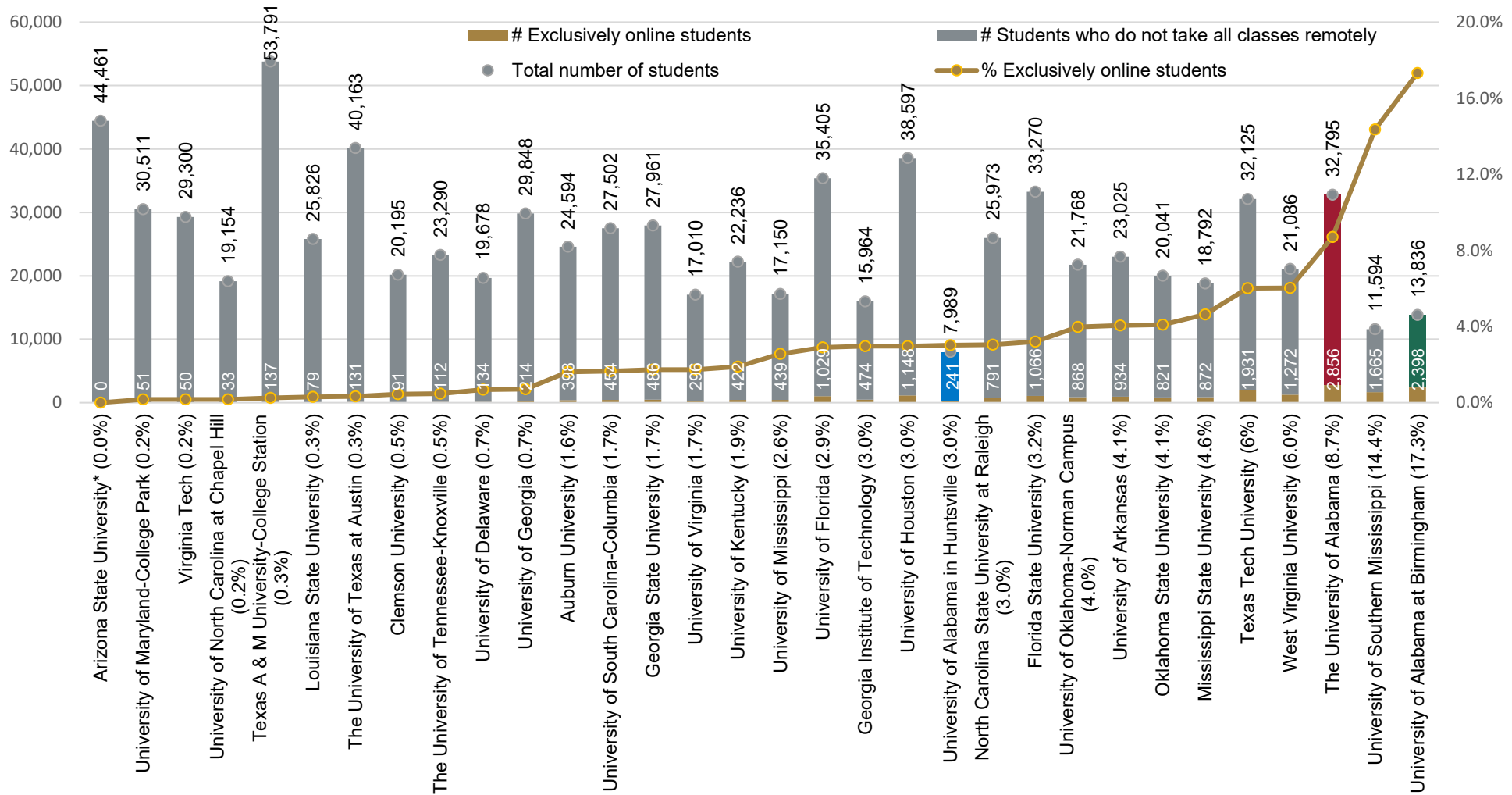
synchronously or asynchronously. This definition would include students enrolled in officially designated distance learning or distance education program courses or those whose general courses are delivered in an exclusively online format. (This definition does not include students enrolled in hybrid courses.)

<sup>1</sup> By this definition, a distance education course would include any course in which students, who are separated from the instructor, receive instructional content exclusively through one or more types of technology that support regular and substantive interaction between students and the instructor

students on UAS campuses were: 4,515 (11.9% of all students) at UA; 5,736 (26.0%) at UAB; and 747 (7.5%) at UAH. These numbers and percentages indicate that the exclusively online enrollment is more prevalent at the graduate level.

In Graph 2, institutions are sorted based on the percentage of students enrolled exclusively online. When compared to other SUG institutions, UAB ranks # 2 based on the percentage of students enrolled exclusively online; UA ranks # 4; and UAH ranks # 13. Once again, these data show that more students enroll exclusively online at UAB and at UA than at many other SUG institutions.

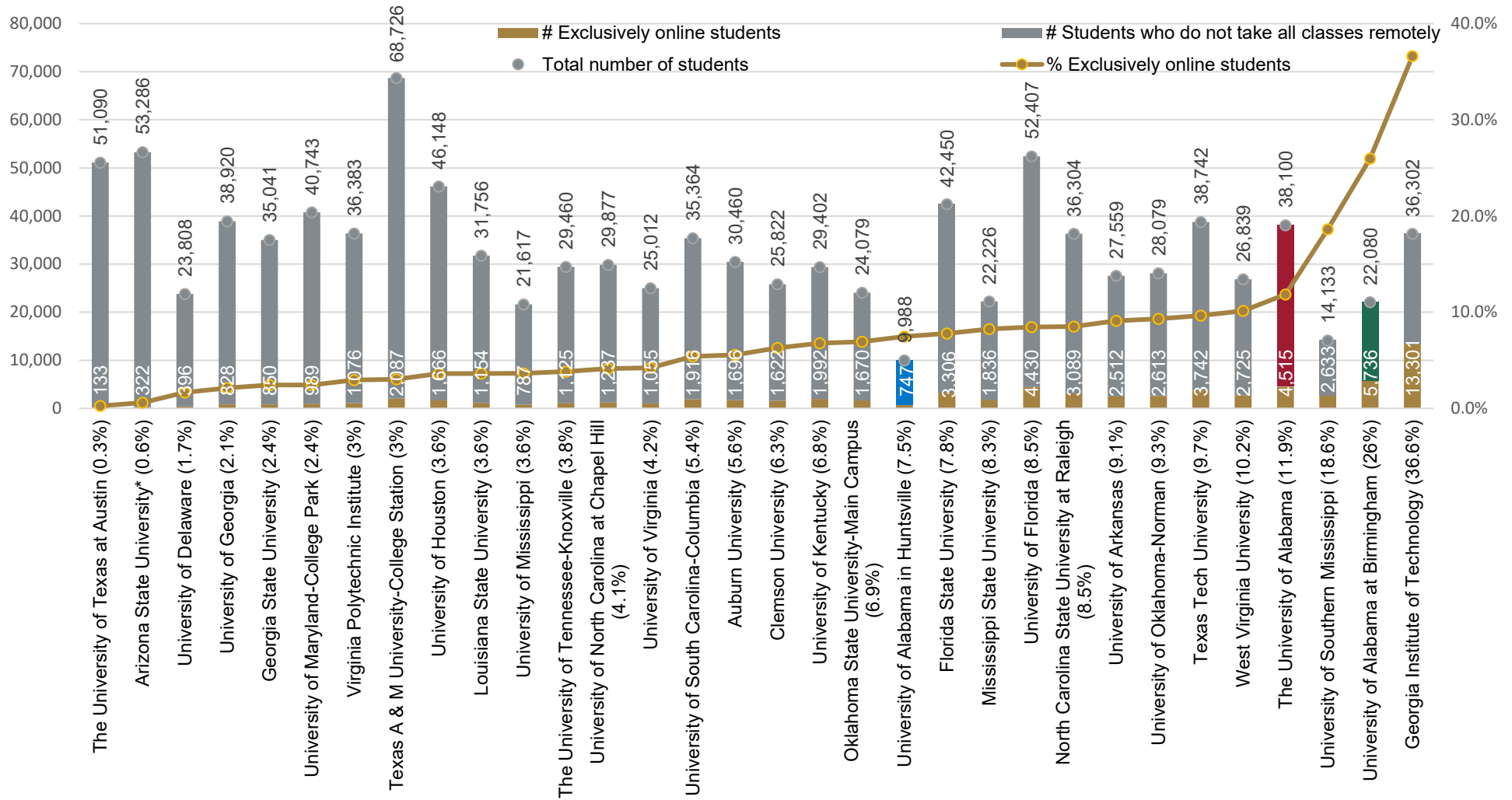
Graph 1 Undergraduate enrollment: Students enrolled exclusively online (Fall 2019)



Source: Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS)

\* Data for Arizona State University should be considered with caution, since starting in fall of 2013, they report Arizona State University Campus Immersion (included here) and Arizona State University Digital Immersion (not included here) separately. The number of undergraduate exclusively online students at Arizona State University Digital Immersion is 33,410 in Fall 2019.

Graph 2 All student enrollment: Students enrolled exclusively online (Fall 2019)



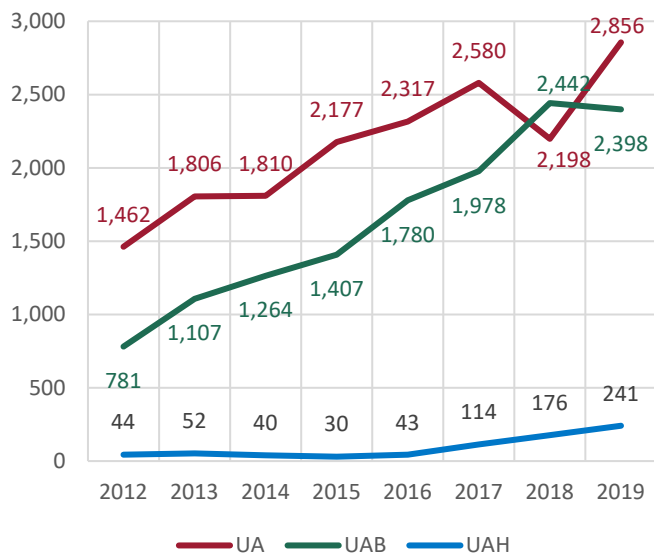
Source: Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS)

\* Data for Arizona State University should be considered with caution, since starting in fall of 2013, they report Arizona State University Campus Immersion (included here) and Arizona State University Digital Immersion (not included here) separately. The number of undergraduate exclusively online students at Arizona State University Digital Immersion is 33,410 in Fall 2019.

### Undergraduate Enrollment Over Time

As shown in Graph 3, over the period from fall 2012 to fall 2019, the number of undergraduate students enrolled exclusively online increased 1.95 times (from 1,462 in 2012 to 2,856 in 2019) at UA; 3.07 times (from 781 to 2,398) at UAB; and 5.48 times (from 44 to 241) at UAH. The median change in the number of exclusively online undergraduate students for the SUG group (UAS institutions and Arizona State excluded) is 2.56 times, which places UA below the median and UAB and UAH above the median.

**Graph 3** Undergraduate enrollment: Number of students enrolled exclusively online over time



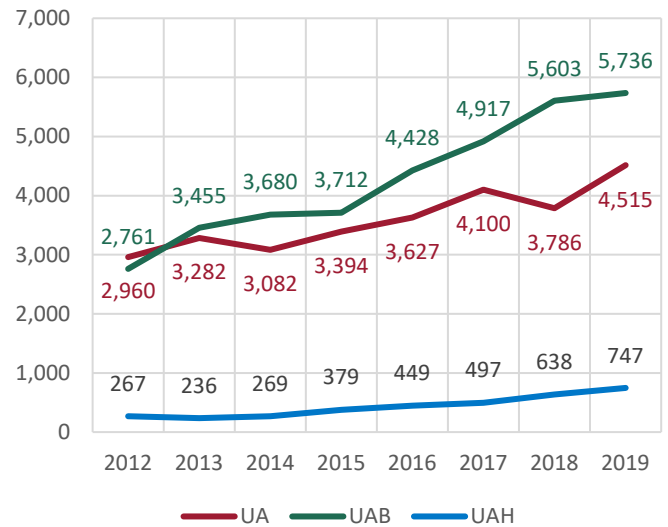
The share of exclusively online undergraduate students increased 1.67 times (from 5.2% in 2012 to 8.7% in 2019) at UA; 2.51 times (from 6.9% to 17.3%) at UAB; and 4.03 times (from 0.7% to 3.0%) at UAH, see Graph 4.

The median change in the share of exclusively online undergraduate students for the SUG group (UAS institutions and Arizona State excluded) is 2.28 times, which, once again, places UA below the median and UAB and UAH above the median.

### All Student Enrollment Over Time

As shown in Graph 5, over the period from fall 2012 to fall 2019, the number of all students enrolled exclusively online increased 1.53 times (from 2,960 in 2012 to 4,515 in 2019) at UA; 2.08 times (from 2,761 to 5,736) at UAB; and 2.80 times (from 267 to 747) at UAH.

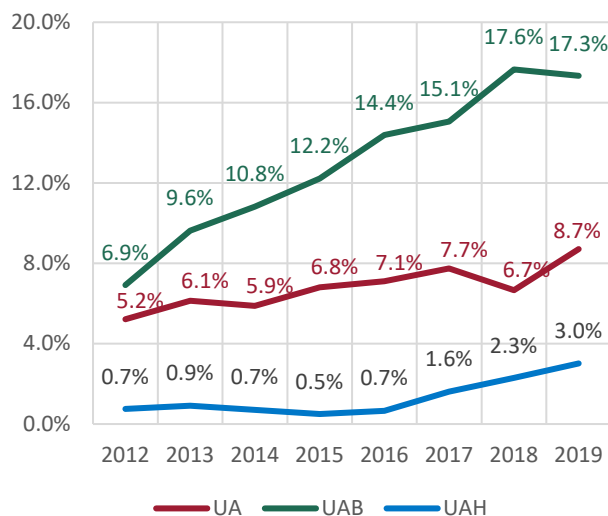
**Graph 5** All student enrollment: Number of students enrolled exclusively online over time



The median change in the number of exclusively online students for the SUG group (UAS institutions and Arizona State excluded) is 1.95 times, which places UA below the median and UAB and UAH above this median.

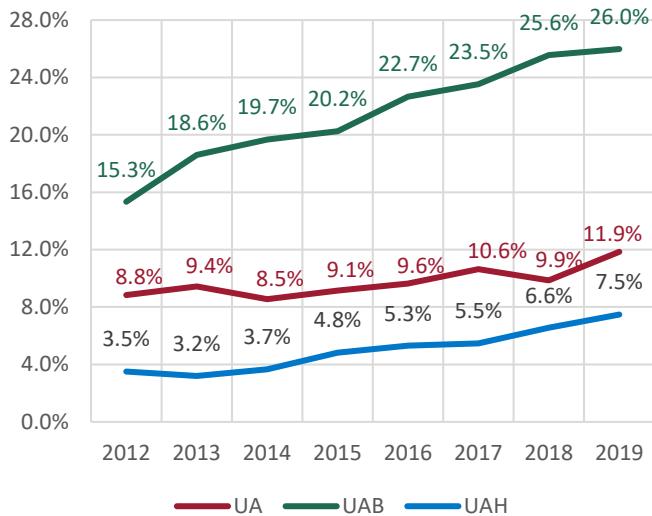
The share of exclusively online students increased 1.34 times (from 8.8% in 2012 to 11.9% in 2019) at UA; 1.69 times (from 15.3% to 26.0%) at UAB; and 2.14 times (from 3.5% to 7.5%) at UAH. See Graph 6.

**Graph 4** Share of undergraduate students enrolled exclusively online over time



The median change in the share of exclusively online students for the SUG group (UAS institutions and Arizona State excluded) is 1.87 times, which places UA and UAB below the median and UAH above the median.

**Graph 6** Share of all students enrolled exclusively online over time



**Conclusion**

The number and share of exclusively online students is greater at UAB and at UA than at other SUG institutions. The number and share of exclusively online students also increased substantially during the period from fall 2012 to fall 2019 for all three UAS institutions. Growth in the number and in the share of exclusively online students was observed at most SUG institutions included for benchmarking purposes in this report.

Overall, growth in the number of exclusively online students is being observed nationally. In fall 2018, there were 6,932,074 students enrolled in distance education courses at degree-granting postsecondary institutions (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES] [Fast Facts](#)). The traditional higher education business model was challenged before the pandemic. The price and value of traditional classroom instruction versus remote instruction were questioned, and many universities began to adapt to these challenges ([Gallagher and Palmer 2020](#)):

*“A number of elite institutions — such as Princeton University, Williams College, Spelman College, and American University — have substantially discounted tuition for their fully*

*online experience in an historically unprecedented fashion, highlighting pricing pressures and opening up Pandora’s box. This comes after a decade of growth in postsecondary alternatives, including “massively open online courses” (MOOCs), industry-driven certification programs, and coding bootcamps. This moment is likely to be remembered as a critical turning point between the “time before,” when analog on-campus degree-focused learning was the default, to the “time after,” when digital, online, career-focused learning became the fulcrum of competition between institutions.”*

In many cases, campuses see the increased number of online students as a positive indicator of students taking advantage of more online offerings and not necessarily a rejection of living or engaging on-campus. In post-pandemic times, institutions will likely have to continue to expand their options for online instruction to remain competitive with their peers who are providing quality online course offerings and to meet the changing demands of students for more flexible and convenient course delivery methods that accommodate their unique needs and changing lifestyles.

**DATA COLLECTION, ANALYSIS & PUBLICATION**

This research brief has been developed and produced by the University of Alabama System Office of Academic and Student Affairs.

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