



# Here to Stay: UCaaS Offers Flexibility, Freedom, and New Ways of Teaching and Learning

Unified communications and collaboration has already transformed hybrid work and learning. As cloud-based platforms rapidly evolve to integrate new capabilities and features, their potential appears limitless.

## **IF FIBER BACKBONE IS THE ESSENTIAL UTILITY**

that keeps higher education humming, then cloud based UCC (or UCaaS) is the power that fiber delivers. In higher education today, no other technology is more ubiquitous, necessary, or relied upon than unified communication and collaboration. Hosting and delivering those tools from the cloud offers institutions new flexibility and cost savings that simply aren't possible with on-premise solutions.

UCaaS allows colleges to cut the cord on landline phone systems and seamlessly deliver every facet of communication, collaboration, and chat through platforms that are constantly innovating, pushed by the post-pandemic hybrid work and learning world that's here to stay.

"You're getting your calendaring, your messaging, meetings, chatting back and forth with each other. You're updating a chat from a meeting you were in

two days ago, and you know people saw it and can react to it immediately," with a platform like Microsoft Teams, said Matt Kenslea, Senior Account Director for Education at Lumen.

Gartner defines UCaaS as a cloud-delivered service that includes several core capabilities, including telephony, meetings, messaging, software applications, APIs, and adjacent or optional services such as an integrated contact center or quality of service monitoring. Microsoft represented **Gartner's UCaaS Magic Quadrant** leader as of May 2022, followed closely by RingCentral, Zoom, and Cisco.

The latest UCaaS tools are so in demand by admin and support staff, students, faculty, and researchers that multiple providers' platforms are now delivered and supported by most higher ed IT departments. Forcing the shift to a single provider's platform may prove challenging for IT, regardless of whether doing so would make their job a bit easier.

Here are three ways in which UCaaS continues to transform work, learning, and service delivery in higher education.

## Hybrid Productivity and Efficiency

In most cases, the pandemic forced rapid changes that were already starting to take shape on college campuses to be adopted overnight. As instruction and work moved into online delivery, UCC and UCaaS became the primary means for keeping everyone connected and productive, no matter where they found themselves. Three years later, acceptance and support for hybrid work and learning is par for the course. Working and learning through UCaaS platforms are now a part of most constituents' daily lives.

The newest class of students who will matriculate

this fall have learned remotely with UCC and videoconferencing tools for most of their high school years. They expect to communicate with professors and fellow students via chat during a lecture they can watch from their dorm room, library, or their home. On the faculty and administration side of the coin, expectations for integrated modes of communication are similar; meeting with colleagues wherever they are and getting work done remotely without requiring a phone are simply how day-to-day work is accomplished in higher education, industry, and enterprise today.

## Next-Gen Teaching and Learning

Will UCaaS platforms like Microsoft Teams replace the LMS? In many cases, it already has. Teams offers instructors and students ways to organize course materials, videos, classroom discussions, and more in one easy-to-access platform that can be accessed from anywhere. Truly, it's possibilities to continue to transform **teaching** and **learning** appear limitless, Kenslea said.

In its "2022 Students and Technology Report: Rebalancing the Student Experience," EDUCAUSE found that when compared "to pre-pandemic data about course modality preferences, students are now expressing stronger preferences for modalities that are mostly or completely online. In fact, the percentage of respondents indicating that they prefer mostly or completely online courses increased more than three-fold from 9% to 29%" in 2022.

As UCaaS platforms look to bake in new artificial intelligence-driven features like audio transcription or facial recognition — and call center functions for administrative and other departmental teams — they offer even more ways to integrate once separate functions.

## Seamless Integrations, Cost Controls

UCaaS’s integrated and comprehensive packages of solutions offer institutions the opportunity to scale to meet current needs as well as future expansions or collaboration adjustments, without borders. Campus footprints continue to expand physically as well as virtually, requiring reliable, seamless connectivity that meets the demands of keeping all-thing-digital running as a single unit.

A June 2022 survey from IDC Research and Lumen found that organizations using UCaaS with minimal or limited technological connectivity across their organizations reported savings and cost optimizations, including IT staff time savings due to more efficient operations (60%) and greater ability to support new IT or business initiatives (65% to 90%). Survey respondents also reported improved agility (70% to 90%), improved ability to adapt to the unexpected (65%), and greater benefits to the time/staff resources

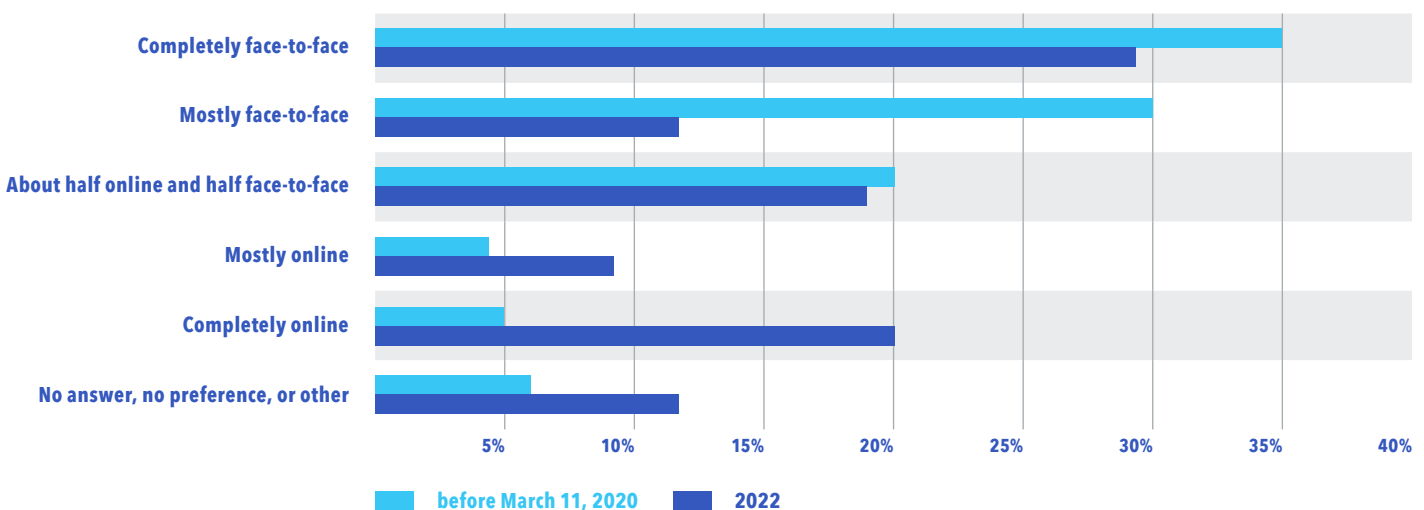
required to deploy new communications technologies (65%).

## What’s Preventing Adoption?

One of the more challenging aspects of adopting UCaaS in higher education lies in navigating complex governance and achieving buy-in across multiple departments, teams, or constituents to standardize on a single provider’s platform. Yet doing so goes a long way toward alleviating support burdens on already-taxed IT teams.

“I attended a conference where a university’s CISO spoke, and she shared that her institution supports 65,000 devices and 11,000 applications throughout their campus. Her last slide addressed governance, and there were 15 different names listed, from 15 different areas. That’s what a college is, right? But you can’t adopt a solution without going through faculty, administrators, and students,” Kenslea said.

## Students’ Course Modality Preferences



Source: 2022 Students and Technology Report: Rebalancing the Student Experience, EDUCAUSE, September 2022 <https://www.educause.edu/ecar/research-publications/2022/students-and-technology-report-rebalancing-the-student-experience/modality-preferences>

From June 2022 Lumen/IDC Research survey: <https://assets.lumen.com/is/content/Lumen/infographic-a-journey-worth-embracing?Creativeid=36976360-e37f-4a00-9089-4f235e287d69>