

Broadening Horizons: Creating an inclusive environment for virtual learners

Authors

Leah M. Fitzgerald, MLS
Megan D. Royce, BTech
Jacky O. Ryan, MEd

Affiliations

SUNY Canton

With the start of the Fall 2021 semester, the campus as a whole finally began to feel like they had the opportunity to reengage students on campus and encourage them to socialize together in person, which wasn't possible at the height of the pandemic. However, SUNY Canton's student population appeared to be split, with roughly 50% on campus and 50% online. A large focal point of the fall semester was the "Best Year Ever" initiative, which focused on engaging students in person with exciting activities nearly every day in August and September. With the virtual students feeling left out, the goal of the Learning Commons, in terms of programming, became making all of our events accessible to all students. Using our Halloween Scavenger Hunt as an example, we will discuss the quick progress we made towards reaching our accessibility goal in a short period of time and what developed after our successful event.

01 Mission

Due to the pandemic, the Learning Commons Engagement Committee tailored their outreach and engagement to be more inclusive and accessible to all learners, including fully remote and online learners. Additionally, SUNY Canton's on-campus population had a culture-shift towards the return to in-person engagement. This caused a necessary shift in outreach and engagement for the Learning Commons, emphasizing hybrid engagement in all events including the annual Halloween Scavenger Hunt. As a result, the format shifted to the use of posters in person and the continued use of icons online with a drawing for gift card prizes instead of physical, first come first serve prizes to reduce COVID-19 exposure.

02 Continuing Inclusive Programming

On October 12, 2021, the Learning Commons Student Advisory Committee (LCSAC) held their annual Fall Semester meeting. The LCSAC is composed of faculty and staff within the Learning Commons and across campus as well as nominated student advisors.

- Provides a chance for students to provide feedback and express concerns about Learning Commons programming.
- Students used the opportunity express their concern about the campus-wide "Best Year Ever" initiative.
- The focus on in-person activities caused many online students to feel left out & forgotten by the college.
- The feedback provided reinforced our mission to ensure all programming and events have an online component, continuing to provide a more inclusive and accessible environment for online students.

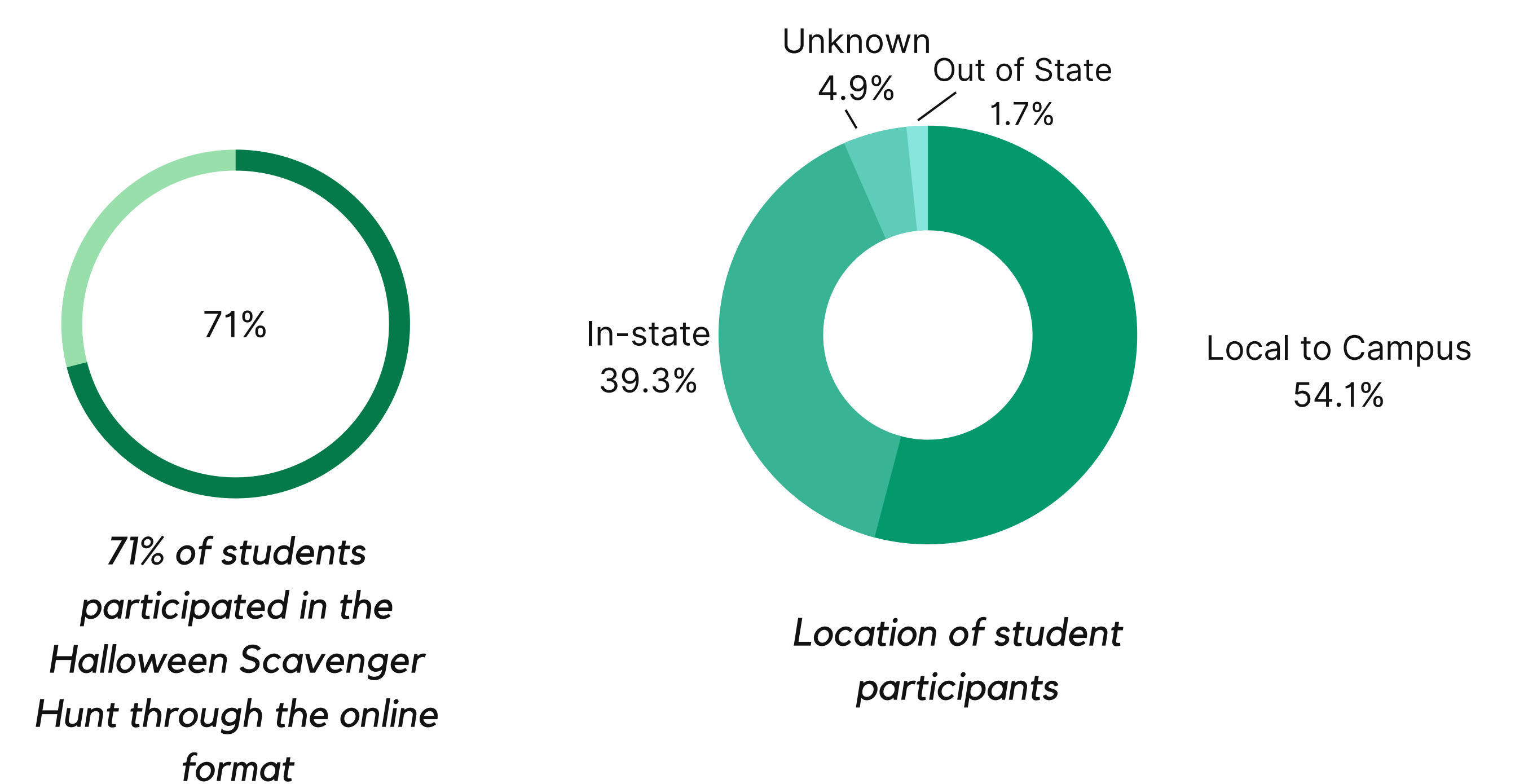
03 Halloween Scavenger Hunt

Historically, engagement was tailored with on-campus students in mind, with a split of roughly 30% for online and 70% for on-campus engagement. Due to the pandemic, programming shifted fully online for AY 2020-2021 and was tailored to be more inclusive and accessible to online learners.

In AY 2021-2022, SUNY Canton had a culture-shift towards the return to in-person engagement. With this in mind, the Learning Commons restructured the annual Halloween Scavenger Hunt while still remaining aware of mid-pandemic concerns. As a result, the format shifted to the use of posters in-person and the continued use of icons online, with a drawing for gift card prizes instead of physical prizes on a first come, first serve basis to reduce COVID-19 exposure.

04 Data

The unexpected result from the data showed that a majority of students preferred the virtual scavenger hunt, despite a large percentage of participants living on campus and having access to the physical building:



05 Creating Accessible Engagement

The success of the Halloween Scavenger Hunt resulted in continued emphasis on hybrid engagement events. This led to the usage of multiple social media platforms used at key times and new virtual platforms being implemented to encourage participation from fully remote and online learners. Additionally, it provided an opportunity for in-person learners to engage with Learning Commons events in a way that they were comfortable with.

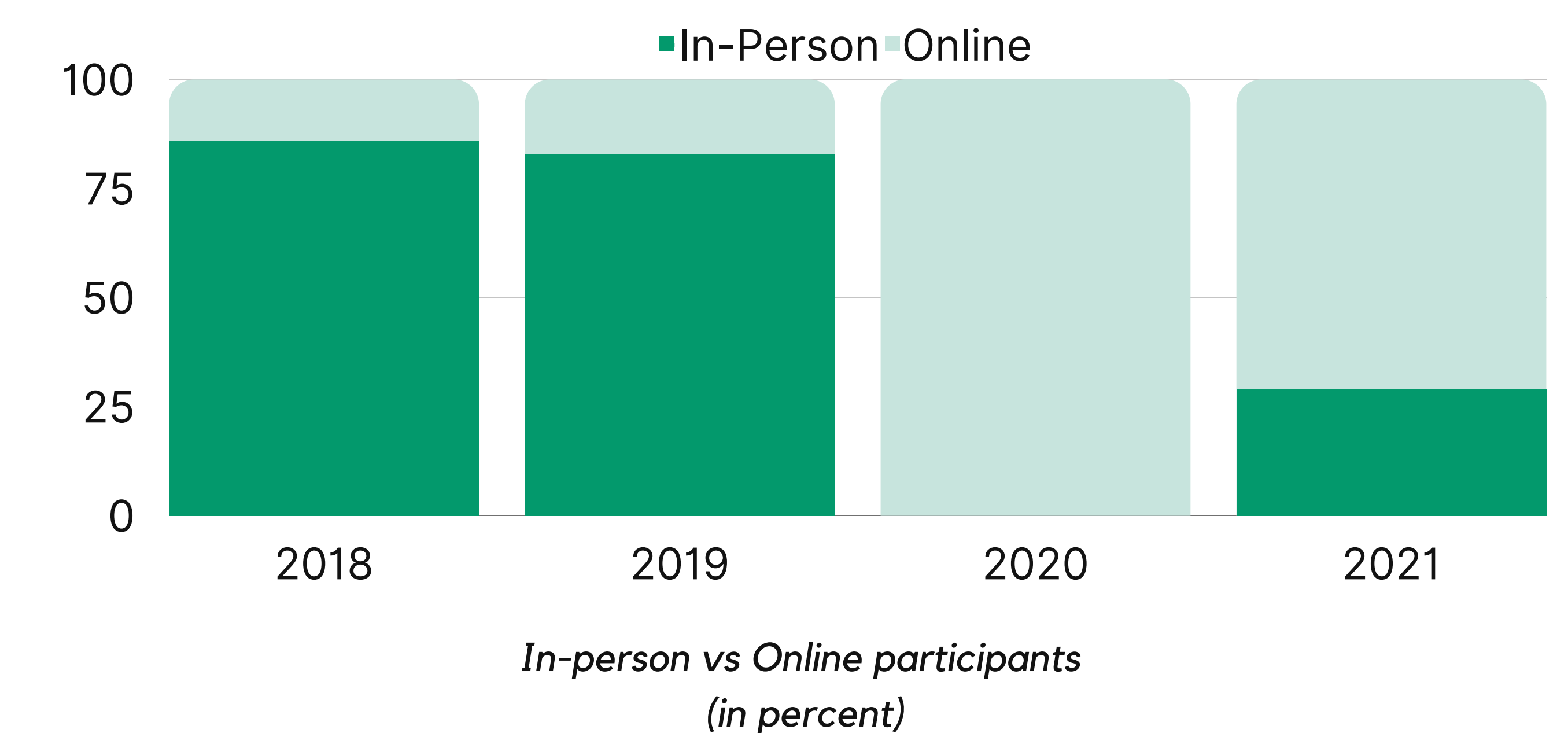
Newly implemented platforms:

- Learning Commons Resources and Events LibGuide
- Virtual Makerspace Padlet
- Virtual Book Displays using Google Slides
- Social media promotions scheduled at various times depending on the platform

06 Future Plans and Goals

The annual Spring meeting of the LCSAC provided us with the opportunity for feedback on the hybrid and virtual events the Learning Commons had thus far: engagement events were received positively. In addition to student feedback, the Engagement Committee received positive feedback from campus administration at large. Due to the feedback from LCSAC and campus administration, we have been able to move forward with new ideas and resources including:

- new subscriptions to meet students' requests
- an increased budget to expand our outreach and programming efforts
- support to move forward with research on implementing augmented and virtual reality in future programming



Related Literature

SUNY Canton (2021, July 23). *SUNY Canton releases 'Best Year Ever' commercial*. <https://www.canton.edu/news/2021/best-year-ever.html>