



# Digital Tools for Uncertain Times

Using Achieve to Foster Mental and Emotional  
Health Among University Students

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# Introduction

Historians, among other academics, can be wary of change. Dr. Vaughn Scribner from the University of Central Arkansas has admitted this about himself. He notes the comfort in sticking to tried and true tools, such as “blue books” for essays and hardcover textbooks. As his students’ reception toward some of these traditional resources hardened, he noticed that he risked alienating his students and even hindering their learning.

In the years preceding the Covid-19 pandemic, Dr. Scribner began to question, “why aren’t students doing the assigned reading?” The investigation of this query led to the uncovering of more dynamic and flexible ways to support students that not only increase academic achievement but also bolster empathy, connection, and mental well-being.

Prior to the emergence of digital tools in our classrooms, many professors resorted to “carrot and stick” methods of ensuring that students did the assigned reading. For most, this involved pop quizzes or graded discussions to assess students’ retention of the reading material, therefore motivating students to complete the reading prior to class. This method, while effective, poses a danger of alienation. In relying on constant pop quizzes, instructors risk building a classroom on fear and anxiety. Furthermore, the rising cost of textbooks and increased inequity among students were additional barriers to accessing the required resources. To combat these barriers to learning, modern academics need a method to create empathy and trust with his students, while also bolstering their academic achievements.

Dr. Scribner found this ideal “new reality” in the digital tool, Achieve. Because Achieve focuses on the accumulation of points, associated with tasks and assignments, it is inherently a system of positive reinforcement. As students acquire more knowledge, that knowledge is met with points. These points provide students with immediate gratification, which then motivates them further. This system is mutually beneficial, as it is meeting students on their terms while also allowing teachers to easily track their students’ progress. It is more flexible than pop quizzes and graded discussions because it allows students to access the material on their time, and in their own way. Finally, Achieve is low-cost, easily accessible and adaptive to any classroom or circumstance. In short, Achieve takes the antiquated “carrot and stick” methods of student accountability and repurposes them in a way that best suits both students and teachers.



# Adapting Achieve to Online Learning

When the Covid-19 Pandemic began, the way that we think about teaching and learning was permanently changed. Instructors were forced to change their entire way of teaching in mere days, and students were challenged to maintain their usual routine while learning in a completely new environment. For Dr. Scribner, this change also meant an adjustment to how Achieve was implemented in online learning. This began with an increase in the amount of points he gave to students; with more points, Dr. Scribner was able to keep students engaged, even from afar. Scribner also recommends scaffolding the number of points throughout the course, so that exams at the start of the course are worth fewer points, and later exams worth more. This helps to lessen the anxieties students might feel at the start of a course, and instills more confidence in students as they progress.

## Dr. Scribner's students' initial reactions to Achieve:

“Helps us with comprehension which is great for essays and tests”

“Very closely mirror lecture, so that extra exposure really helps”

“Helps review the material in an immersive way outside of class”



In addition to maintaining motivation and engagement during online learning, Achieve also allows teachers to keep track of their students in a more positive way. Achieve creates a system of connections between students and teachers, based on mutual understanding and belief in a student's abilities. This system increases forgiveness and empathy and creates space for understanding when students are struggling to reach deadlines or make the expected progress. Because Achieve is inherently an "all carrots, no sticks" system, there is no room for negative feedback. Students can only gain points, which proves to be much more motivating than the threat of negative feedback. Achieve's positive foundation creates empathy and connection between students and teachers. During distance learning in 2020, this connection proved to be essential as students realized their potential to excel during a time when everything else was uncertain.

## Looking Ahead

It is clear to anyone in academia that we are still experiencing the impact of the Covid pandemic on our students and our classroom environments. We can expect this influence to continue for years to come, as even students who were as young as 3 and 4 in 2020 will carry residual impacts with them into their university years. Not only have these young students been affected socially and emotionally (as they spent developmentally critical years in isolation), but the academic impact will inevitably trickle down throughout their school years and inevitably be a factor in their higher education. In Texas, for example, two-thirds of third-graders tested below grade level in math in 2021 (compared to one-half in 2019). As more and more students progress through their primary years with below-grade-level abilities, we can expect to see students enter universities with less preparation than pre-covid generations.



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The way to address this upcoming divide, however, is not to lessen the standards that we hold for students. On the contrary, the best way to support the incoming classes is to consider the tools that we use to reach our students. University-aged students have changed over the past decade: they are more prone to thinking about their individual identities and place in the world. They also tend to be more sensitive and display much higher rates of anxiety. Once we understand how incoming students might differ from previous generations, we can meet them where they are and help them grow. To support students holistically, we can consider four varying approaches:

**Academic Integrity:** Because the temptation to cheat was heightened during online learning, many students will need to learn to trust their own abilities.

**Academic Rigor:** Consider adjusting your expectations based on the class's abilities at the start of the course. This is also an opportunity to reward students with more points when they demonstrate increased rigor.

**Academic Curiosity:** Curiosity can relate directly to motivation, which likely decreased during online learning. By increasing a student's motivation, you can also see an increase in curiosity and interest levels.

**Academic Development:** This is an opportunity to recognize when and how students demonstrate significant growth, especially when students enter a course with anxiety or higher levels of dependence.

In addition to supporting students academically, these four pillars will help to address anxieties surrounding academics among incoming students.



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# Uncertain Futures in Higher Education

Given the decreasing birth rates, we can expect that universities will have fewer students in the coming decades. With this shift, there will be an increase in demand for fewer students. In our evolving world, institutions need to consider how we can connect and build empathy with our students, rather than simply filling them with knowledge. The result of these strong relationships will likely be an increase in retention rates in higher education. When students feel like they belong and have a connection to a place and its people, they are more likely to commit themselves to their academic journey.

On the faculty side, years of pandemic teaching and the constantly shifting educational landscape has caused a serious drop in morale. This is most evidently seen in movements such as “the great resignation” and “quiet quitting.” Academics have dedicated themselves to their students throughout the pandemic and are yet to feel any relief. While tools like Achieve may not have a high impact on an instructor’s time, they do have a great impact on student relationships and motivation. Furthermore, these tools help us to consider our own health and wellness as we build these connections. In the end, these digital tools help teachers to help their students; when we see our students succeed, we, in turn, feel successful and therefore happier in our jobs. In a time when we are all rebuilding relationships that may have fractured during the pandemic, it is essential that we remember the impactful tools available to aid in this reconstruction.

## What Vaughn’s Students had to say about Finding Hope Through Connection, Empathy, and Retention

“I can safely learn content without fear of losing... user friendly and it doesn’t stress me out”

“I enjoy that I can learn the material at my own pace, without stressing too much if I get one question wrong”

“It helps motivate me to read my book and enforces good study habits”

“It brings stress off me knowing that as long as I complete it I get full credit, so I feel like I can actually learn the material”

“Reassures me and allows me to feel confident in what I read”





**Vaughn Scribner** is an Associate Professor of History at the University of Central Arkansas. He has used Achieve's 'read and practice' methodology in his Intro to American History Course for a number of years, and is a Macmillan Learning Faculty Consultant.

This document is an adaptation of a webinar presentation that Vaughn Scribner gave for Macmillan Learning in 2022.

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