

Testing for Student Tech Readiness Enhances Personalized Retention Efforts

How nine years of device-readiness data — and a new federal rule — are reshaping the conversation higher-ed leaders need to have about online attrition.

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On April 20, 2026, the U.S. Department of Education published its proposed *STATS Earnings Accountability for Postsecondary Programs* rule. With the public comment period closing May 20 and final rules expected to take effect July 1, 2026, every Title IV-eligible institution is now operating under a new reality: graduate earnings, measured program by program, will determine federal financial-aid eligibility.

The rule itself does not require schools to demonstrate retention or attrition interventions, and the Earnings Premium it computes does not directly subtract for dropouts — that calculation is run on completers only. But the rule does not stand alone. It sits inside a regulatory stack — cohort default rates, repayment metrics, a new administrative-capability standard, and a parallel accreditation overhaul moving explicitly toward outcomes-based review — that does count dropouts, in several places at once. The student who quietly disappears before completing is invisible to the Earnings Premium numerator but visible to almost everything else.

That is the regulatory environment that has reframed our work — and the work of every online program leader reading this.

The familiar problem, restated for 2026

Online students face every traditional risk factor their on-campus peers face. They also face one their peers don't: the personal technology they're expected to learn on. If the LMS is the virtual campus, then the student's browser, operating system, and connection are the vehicle that gets them there. When the vehicle doesn't start on day one, many students don't call for help. They withdraw — and the institution never sees the cause.

The leak moved, but it didn't close

Across the last 24 months — 14,452 device-readiness scans at 14 institutions — the picture is clearer than at any point in our nine-year dataset. Average readiness score: 79.5 of 100. Median download speed: 121.5 Mbps. Webcam present on 93.9 percent of devices. The bandwidth gap and the mobile-carrier equity gap that defined the early-pandemic years have largely closed.

What hasn't closed is browser and operating-system hygiene. About four in ten students arrive each term on an out-of-date browser. About four in ten arrive on an outdated operating system. One in three issue-flagged sessions has more than one fixable problem at the same time. None of this shows up in an LMS dashboard. None of it is visible to a student-success advisor working from grade-book data alone.

These are the variables now most exposed under earnings-accountability — small, durable, fixable issues that quietly compound into withdrawals.

How the rule actually punishes attrition

The Earnings Premium itself is computed from completers, so a student who never finishes is not in that number at all. The damage runs through three indirect channels — and they are real.

The first is cohort-composition risk. A high-attrition program ends up with a smaller and less representative completer pool. A handful of low earners has more leverage on the median. Programs sitting near the earnings threshold can flip from passing to failing on a year that loses three students.

The second is the adjacent federal tests that do count dropouts directly. Cohort default rates, repayment metrics, and the new administrative-capability standard — which requires at least half of an institution's Title IV recipients and Title IV dollars to be in programs not classified as low-earning — all count students who borrowed without completing. A student who borrows \$7,000, leaves in the second semester, never earns the credential, and never repays is invisible to the Earnings Premium but very visible to every adjacent test the institution faces.

The third is time-to-completion disclosure and the parallel accreditation overhaul. The rule requires institutions to publish median time-to-completion per program; stop-outs and re-starts inflate that figure. The accreditation rewrite is moving explicitly toward outcomes-based review — completion, retention, time-to-degree, employment. Even where the Earnings Premium itself doesn't see attrition, the accreditor will.

Personalized retention starts before the LMS shows distress

Personalized retention has historically meant outreach calibrated to grades, attendance, and engagement. Those signals arrive after a student has begun to disengage. Device-readiness data arrives before. It tells the advisor, in plain language, that this student is on a five-year-old browser, on a slow connection, in a household that may benefit from a campus or public-library alternative — and the advisor can lead the conversation with a fix instead of a diagnosis.

We see this in practice. At one rural-northern technical college, a student-services team uses scan results to open the conversation: confirming the connection issue with a second test, explaining how streaming cuts available bandwidth during class hours, and offering specific alternatives — a service-tier upgrade, a public-library workspace, extended on-campus computer-lab hours. The conversation starts before assignment deadlines. The student stays.

That same approach scales. The TechReady.io dashboard aggregates anonymized scan results across an institution — no personally identifying information collected — and surfaces the patterns that should drive program design: which cohorts face the steepest browser drift, which terms have multi-issue rates above the norm, whether bandwidth alternatives need to be built into orientation. Institutions use the dashboard to design before the cohort arrives, not to autopsy it after.

What this means for 2026

Taken in isolation, the proposed earnings-accountability rule does not punish your school for a student who drops out — that student simply isn't in the Earnings Premium calculation. But the regulatory stack the rule sits inside punishes that same dropout several times over. And the Earnings Premium itself becomes more volatile when attrition is high, because a smaller completer pool is more sensitive to a handful of low-earning graduates. Institutions with a documented evidence trail on student readiness will be in a substantively better position to defend their numbers — to the Department of Education, to their accreditor, and to their board.

The work, restated for 2026: measure what your LMS can't see. Address the simple things before they become withdrawals. Use the dashboard your program has needed for a decade.

Measure readiness. Defend your outcomes.