



# What High-Achieving Students Have Discovered Through Virtual Learning

ALVS (Apex Learning Virtual School)



## Overview

Student athletes face a real challenge. To stay at the top of their game both athletically and educationally, they must learn to balance their demanding training and travel schedules for games, tournaments, and competitions with that of a flexible yet rigorous academic program that emphasizes the importance of learning as they prepare for their future.

For many student athletes, the solution often means selecting a virtual learning program. Virtual learning affords these students the choice of time, pace, path, and place for learning, which their demanding schedules require, while providing access to an educational program that allows them to excel academically, offering the breadth of courses to meet rigorous standards for a high school diploma, the flexibility to prepare for post-secondary opportunities, and the support to keep them on track as they progress toward high school graduation.

To understand what it takes to be successful in a virtual learning environment, I spoke with students, each of whom were identified as high-achieving students and several who are also student athletes. In our conversations, I asked them:

- How would you describe the benefits of virtual learning?
- What has been critical to your success in virtual learning?
- How did virtual learning prepare you for your next steps beyond high school graduation?
- What advice would you offer to students who are new to virtual learning in terms of their academic success?

Their experiences offer insights and wisdom that lead to academic success in Virtual Learning.

## Meet Our Students

**Carlo Hayden** admitted that tennis is not a traditional high school sport. To play at the highest level, however, you have to have to train during the day and travel for competitions. “It’s the sacrifice I had to make if I intended to play college tennis,” he said. Carlo, who has been a virtual learning student throughout his high school years, is a recent ALVS graduate who attends Tufts University in Medford, Massachusetts, on a tennis scholarship.

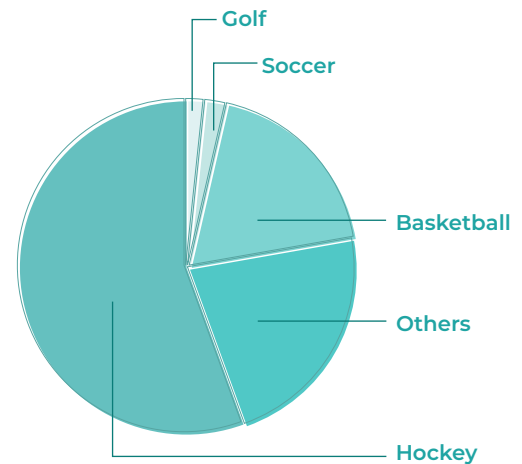
**Kevin Xin**, a Chicago native, has been playing hockey since he was 10 years old. Balancing his course work in a traditional in-person learning environment along with his rigorous hockey training was tough. “I was often traveling out of state for tournaments and showcases,” he said. So as 10th grade approached, Kevin decided to transition to virtual learning. His decision allowed him to travel to China and compete for a spot on the national team—where in 2019, he made the U20 team. He is also a competitive speed-cuber. Kevin graduated from ALVS in 2021 and recently started his college career at the University of Illinois.

**Chloe Eanes** started her senior year at ALVS in 2021. Competitive sports was not a factor in her choice of virtual learning—rather, it was a medical condition that contributed to her decision. “I wasn’t feeling well physically,” she said, “and with so many appointments, I was missing a lot of school.” Chloe began virtual learning near the beginning of her freshman year. Now fully recovered, Chloe acknowledged that for her, “virtual learning is so much less stress socially and I can focus on my work.” Chloe already has her sights set on her post-secondary pathway. She wants to be an author.

Generally speaking, high-achieving students who choose virtual learning develop strong self-awareness of who they are as learners. When I asked them to describe themselves as students, words such as hard working, driven, and motivated consistently rose to the surface. Their responses indicate an understanding of what motivates them to engage in the learning.

- Carlo is willing to push himself with classes. “I have a pretty strong work ethic,” he said—but was quick to add that he values balance in his life, including sleep.
- Kevin tries to achieve the best scores he can in the classroom and on assignments. “If I have concepts or classwork I’m struggling with, I try to seek help or find other resources to help me figure out what I might have misunderstood,” he explained.
- Chloe described herself as very competitive. She and her friends “love to try to beat each other for the best grade.” That competitive edge is a motivator for her. “I just like getting good grades in school,” she admitted, “because it will take me places. It will help me get into a good college and it will help me with a future job. Overall, I just feel more prepared.”

With that background in mind, what can we learn from these students who not only chose, but also thrive in a virtual learning program?



Full-time ALVS students by sport for 2020-21

## How would you describe the benefits of virtual learning?

For these students, there are clear benefits to virtual learning, among them **flexibility**, **efficiency**, and the **self-directed nature of learning**. But, as Carlo clearly articulated, “It can kind of go both ways.” They admit to some challenges, particularly in their freshman year, as they transitioned from a more traditional environment that was driven by a bell schedule, learning blocks, and teacher-directed learning. In other words, the benefits that they now value required them to develop their habits of learning to take full advantage of what virtual learning offered.

- Not surprisingly, **flexibility** is the first thing students mentioned when describing the benefits of virtual learning. “To be able to build your own schedule is very important as an athlete, especially to an individual athlete,” Carlo acknowledged, “because you have to work your schedule around training and practice as well as travel and tournaments.” Carlo went on to admit, however, that “flexibility can also be your worst enemy. I struggled my freshman year because in virtual learning, you don’t really have anyone constantly reminding you what you need to do.”
- Students indicated that they also value **efficiency**, another benefit of virtual learning. In a virtual learning program, students discover that they can maximize their learning time, turning an eight-hour school day into three or four hours, sometimes even two, depending on their schedule and assignments. There is agreement that “you just cut out so much time—walking between classes, eliminating interruptions, and waiting for class to start. The fact that you can really put your head down and get your work done is huge,” By being efficient with their time, these students complete their schoolwork and then redirect their “saved” time toward other things they need to be doing.
- Finally, students pointed out the importance of becoming self-directed learners. Overall, they identified both time management and self-discipline as two skills that are essential for success in virtual learning. These skills are honed with time, experience, practice, and maturity. When Kevin’s hockey training was particularly demanding, he struggled to pace himself. “Sometimes I just didn’t do as much work and lagged behind,” he said. “Then, when I had more time, I’d get more work done.” He admitted, “You have to be motivated and you have to keep track of what assignments you’ve completed and what you still need to do. That’s up to you.”

“Virtual learning gave me the flexibility to balance my coursework with hockey. But I also wanted to learn—to get the concepts down and learn in this environment. It actually far exceeded my expectations.”

—Kevin

“Virtual school requires you to be self-driven and self-directed. That can be difficult as a freshman when you have a million other things on your mind. But you have to hold yourself accountable.”

—Carlo

“If you are a high-achieving student who actually has the urge to learn, I think a virtual learning program will offer the support through teachers and other resources to learn whatever content you want to know.”

—Kevin

## What has been critical to your success in virtual learning?

While students mentioned numerous contributing factors to their success—focus, motivation, self-discipline, and, again, flexibility—four consistent themes were evident in all their responses. **Scheduling and time management, accountability and personal responsibility, balance, and deeper learning and resourcefulness** have been essential to achieving successful outcomes in a virtual learning environment.

- “I had to develop a system for **scheduling** my work,” Carlo said. “Early on, it was tough for me to manage my workload for the week. Sometimes I had no assignments due on Monday, but six assignments due on Tuesday. That just didn’t help me schedule my work.” Working with a tutor helped Carlo to come up with a system. Each week he made a list of all his assignments for the next week and then divided them by each day. “Once I had that system in place, it made it easier to stay on schedule.” While each student reflected on some form of time management and the ability to focus on the work at hand, they agreed that a system for mapping out the course work and assignments for the week brought clear visibility to what needed to get done.
- Kevin spoke to the **personal responsibility and accountability** necessary to persevere. “In order to be successful, you have to actually go and do the work,” he said. “While you don’t necessarily have to like all the courses or assignments, you have to have the mental attitude to fight through.” Kevin believes that sports has been a good way to develop perseverance. “There are going to be times when you don’t make a team or your team loses 15-0. But, if you really want to be good at what you do, you have to get over those setbacks. You have to push through, do the repetitions, the tedious, the things that may not be the most fun for you or the things that maybe you’re not best at, but this is the work you have to put in to excel at the game.” For Kevin, the same goes for learning and his other passion, competitive speed cubing. He is good at it because, as he said, he has “put in the hard work to do it well.”
- For Chloe, her overall health and well-being added a lot of stress every day. In a virtual learning program, she had more flexibility to **balance** her physical, social, and emotional health with the expectations of school. It gave her the flexibility to learn when she was ready to learn and minimized the pressure of social distractions. Finding balance ties into scheduling, according to Carlo. “As a student athlete, I wouldn’t want to do an eight-hour day, then no school the next day unless I had to. So, I think balancing things out makes your goals a little more reasonable.”

“I basically manage my own schedule so I don’t feel all this pressure to catch up with everyone else. I go at my own pace and I really like that in a virtual school.”

—Chloe

“No one is going to do it for you. You just have to recognize that if you don’t do it today, it’s just going to compound and make it harder tomorrow.”

—Carlo

“In my senior year, I took English 12, Honors Pre-Calculus, Earth Science, AP Micro-Economics, AP Macro-Economics and Music Appreciation. I also retook Honors Biology to improve my grade from 9th grade. I earned A’s in all my classes with the exception of Macro Economic. I earned an A-.”

—Kevin

“In order to be successful, you have to actually go and do the work.”

—Kevin

- For high-achieving virtual students, their motivation and resourcefulness often leads to **deeper learning and understanding**. Carlo indicated that both English and social studies classes were pretty easy for him, but “math was my biggest difficulty. When it came to math and physics, I sought out Khan Academy videos and worked with a tutor to get more support.” Kevin observed “In virtual learning, you are not constrained to the curriculum itself. With some concepts, I was able to absorb the information and then, if the topic or concept interested me or I wanted to learn more about it, I could just branch off and go explore that topic more in depth. That was a really good aspect of the curriculum itself because the virtual platform is really set up that way.” Chloe agreed. “I like to dive deeper into a subject. For me, I often look at one more video or one more post to extend what I’m learning.” Whether driven by interest or need for deeper understanding, these students are not afraid to find resources to support their learning.

## How did virtual learning prepare you for your next steps beyond high school graduation?

For many first-year college students, managing their schedules, juggling time for study, classes, and assignments, and developing the discipline for self-directed learning are often challenges. Students with experience in a virtual learning program have been developing the skills they’ll need to be successful in college throughout their high school career.

- Kevin recognized that “virtual learning has really helped me develop the self-discipline and self-directedness I’ll need in a college environment. When you go to college, and later find a job, you cannot expect everyone to spoon-feed you everything, so it’s good to have developed those habits during high school.”
- For Chloe, using a digital curriculum is teaching her to pinpoint what she is supposed to learn. “It’s helping me to be prepared for the kind of learning I can expect in college. No one is going to feed me the answers.”
- Carlo, who started his first year of college in the fall, admitted, “I had no idea how I was going to react to in-person classes.” He compared his virtual learning experience with other tennis players who have completed their high school program online and have gone on to Harvard and other Ivy League schools. As Carlo reported, “They say it’s not as big a transition as you might expect.” Carlo is pursuing an economics major with a minor in finance. “I’m a little intimidated to see how I’ll match up against the other students,” he said. “But I think it’s going to be a fantastic opportunity.”

“Learning online tends to be more work, although the work helps you understand the subject more. Sometimes it is good to have a little more work.”

—Chloe

“Virtual learning helps you build great skills to hold yourself accountable, set up schedules, and be responsible for your learning. It’s some of the best skills I’ve gained from online learning and helps set me apart from students in a traditional school environment.”

—Carlo

“Because I’ve been in a virtual learning program, I can prepare my friends for what they might face when transitioning from in-person learning to online.”

—Chloe

## What advice would you offer to students who are new to virtual learning in terms of their academic success

Since the pandemic forced nearly all students to transition to emergency remote learning in the spring of 2020 and to virtual learning for a portion, (if not all) of the 2020-2021 academic year, those students who had experience in virtual learning environments often became a resource and support for their friends.

- “A lot of my buddies who were attending traditional school really struggled with online because they couldn’t learn independently and they didn’t hold themselves accountable for their learning,” Carlos said. His advice, “Schedule your week out and hold yourself accountable each day. That’s the thing that made me go from being constantly two weeks behind to being on track.”
- Kevin said, “You obviously have to be prepared for the fact that it’s different than a traditional school. You have to be self-directed. You have to have the discipline to complete assignments on your own and not expect a lot of lecture-based classes or 1:1 with teachers. And then, you have to want to learn. You’re going to have to be prepared to work things out for yourself.”
- Chloe described herself and her friends in this way: “We all want to do our best.” As she reflected on her choice of virtual learning, she would tell other students that they were likely to feel “less pressured to follow a rigid schedule and just be physically healthier overall. And, if you are an introvert like me, you’ll feel less pressure socially.”

Well-planned and implemented virtual learning programs fulfill the promise to give students more control over the time, pace, path, and place of learning. As we continue to promote successful learning models that meet the needs of students, including student athletes, it is important—in fact, necessary—to tap into their experiences and advice. They have wisdom to share if we take the time to ask the questions and listen to their voices as they offer insights that drive their success. For high-achieving students, their experiences reflect a developing self-awareness and a skill set which will prepare them for success in college and beyond.

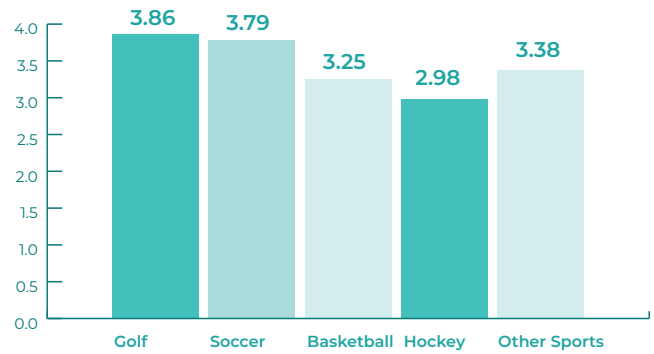


Jean Sharp has dedicated her career to supporting great teaching and learning, both in the classroom and online. For the past 10 years, she has served as the Chief Academic Officer at Apex Learning. Now, after 32 years in educational technology and a few more years in the classroom, Jean is embracing a new season. She plans to continue to contribute to education in relevant and impactful ways through consulting, writing, and ongoing learning. You can connect with Jean on LinkedIn.



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Average GPA for student athletes by sport

# 47 students

47 students who graduated in 2020-21 will be attending Division 1 programs on athletic scholarships.

- 18 are basketball players.
- 15 are hockey players.
- 9 are football players.
- 2 are soccer players.
- 2 are golfers.
- 1 is a volleyball player.

Since 2019, ALVS has had close to 200 graduates annually. In 2020-21, 99 student athletes completed their high school diplomas through ALVS.

Additional data:

- Total number of student athlete enrollments in 2020-21: **181**
- Total number of courses completed by student athletes: **378**
- Average number of course completions/credits earned per student athlete. **4 credits** (We allow seniors to graduate with just 3 credits if they have earned enough to graduate after English 12 and two elective credits.)
- Total number of student athletes who graduated in 2020-21: **99**

Graduation rates are growing. From 2014 to 2018 we had **100** graduates in total. In 2019-20 we had close to **200**.

