



**The Sonocent Community presents:**

Equity, effectiveness,  
and the role of peer  
notetakers

# An introduction

## Our community

We wanted to create a space for disability support professionals across North America to share expertise, compare services and discuss challenges. Out of that desire came the Sonocent Community, now approaching its first anniversary.

As our Community grows, our capacity to crowd-source data and insight grows with it.

Equity, Effectiveness and the Role of Peer Notetakers is the latest in our series of national surveys, creating with it a rich set of data useful to all working in disability support.

## The survey's aims

We asked survey participants fundamental questions about their services, aiming to learn more about what the future holds for note taking support and how institutions aim to respond to a changing landscape. Specifically, we were interested in the role peer notetakers continue to play in 2020. With the advent of note taking tech, do traditional accommodations hold their appeal? And what future do they have?

## The results

The results of the survey portray an industry on the edge of change.

They show support departments, in increasing numbers, planning to move away from traditional accommodations and embrace the full potential of technology.

But the picture is far from simple. Despite the prevalence of assistive tech for note taking support, institutions still lean on peer notes to accommodate students. And attitudes towards this accommodation vary from the broadly positive to wholly negative.

We've highlighted some significant stats and responses from the survey to give an indication of where peer notes stand in 2020 and beyond.

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# Contributors

## Jess Easby, Sonocent Community Manager



You may have spoken to Jess at ATIA or AHEAD. She runs Sonocent's Community projects, including the survey that produced this whitepaper. Jess has been instrumental in creating a real movement of disability support professionals, driving research and facilitating the free exchange of ideas.

Her current focus is building an interactive platform for all our Community members to gather, discuss issues and share insight. Contact: [jessica.easby@sonocent.com](mailto:jessica.easby@sonocent.com)

## Luke Garbutt, Content Writer



Luke is our in-house writer. He writes extensively on disability support, ed tech and higher education for the Sonocent Blog, and wrote the whitepaper you're now reading.

Interested in collaborating on content? Email Luke at [luke.garbutt@sonocent.com](mailto:luke.garbutt@sonocent.com)

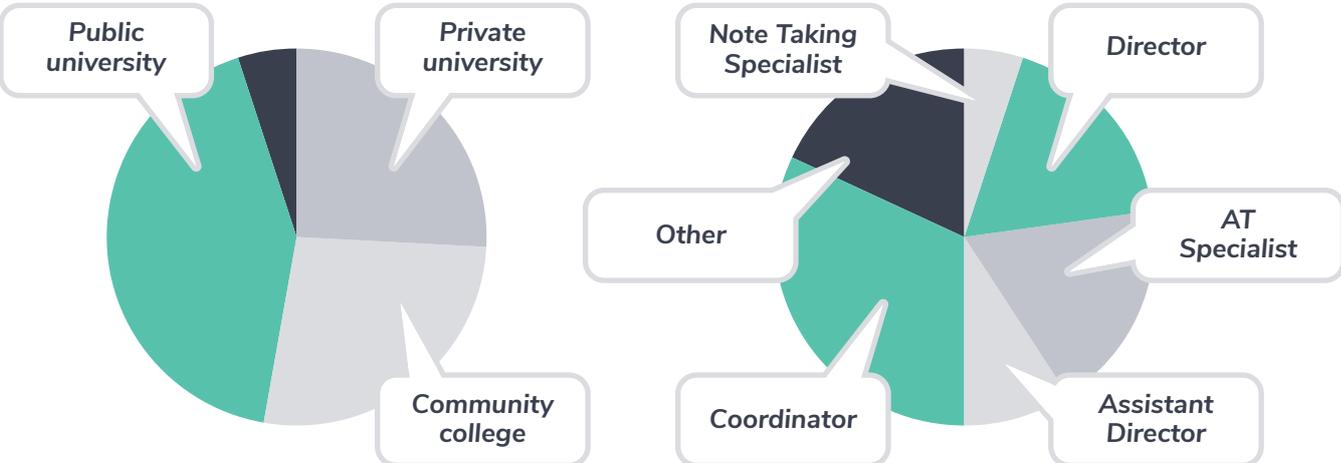


# Who took part?

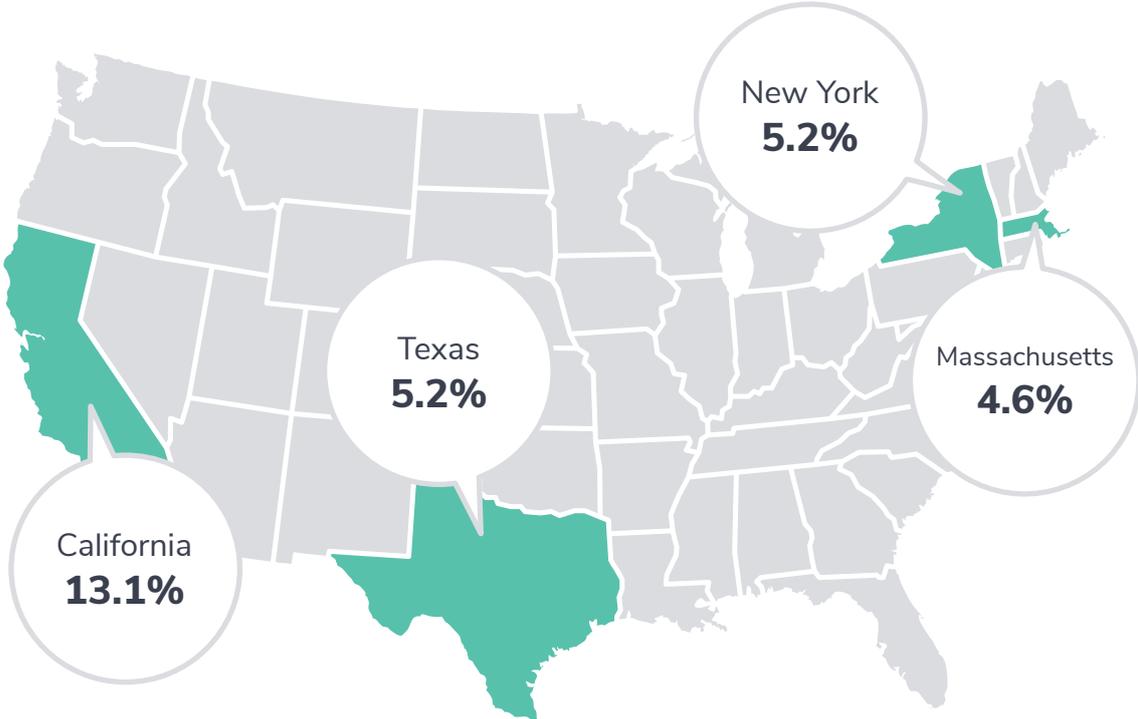
Disability support professionals from **over 100 North American institutions** completed the survey.

They represent a cross-section of the national community, cutting across all regions, institution type, student population sizes and departmental structures.

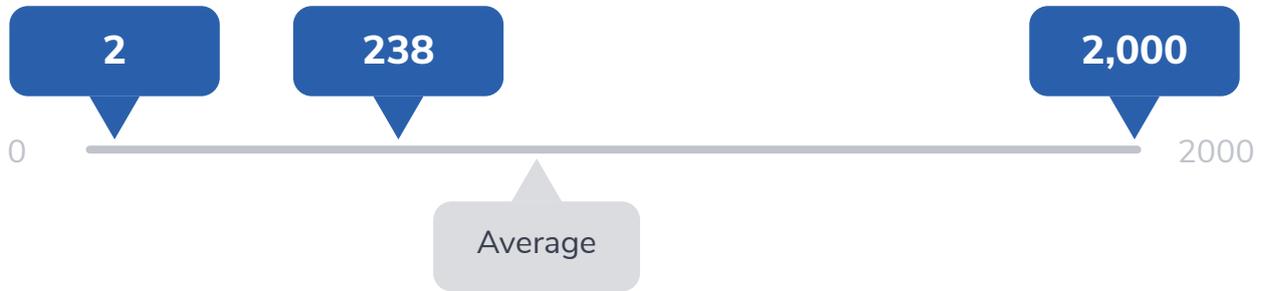
## Here's a quick snapshot of participants:



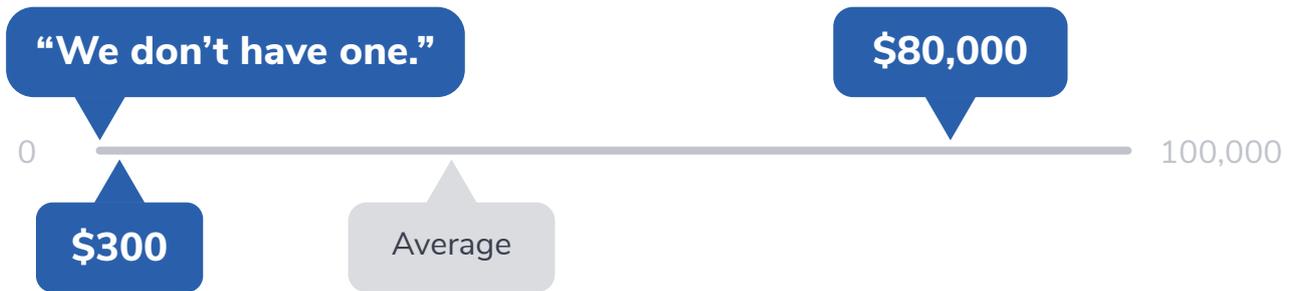
## State leaderboard:



### How many students they serve:



### What budget they work with:



### A cause for concern?

**21.9%** of respondents claimed they didn't have enough budget to cover all students requiring note-taking support. This is a significant percentage of respondents, and suggests there are still plenty of departments struggling to make ends meet.

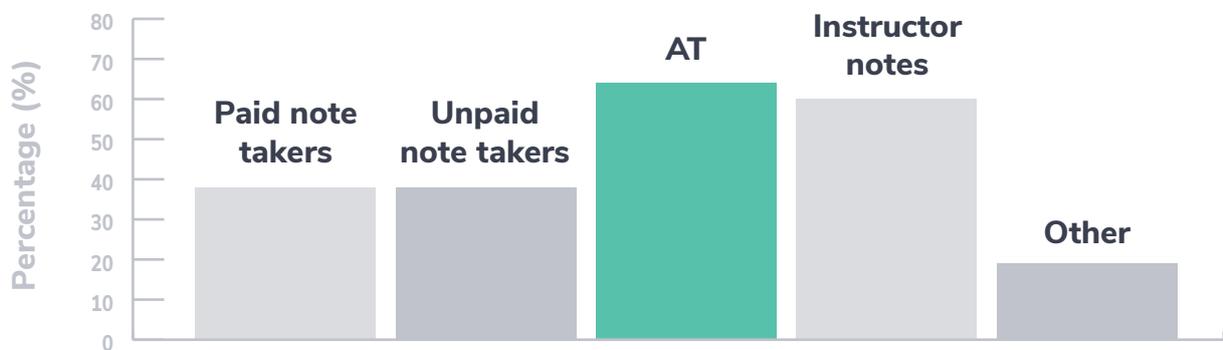
For more information on budget in disability support departments, see our 2019 State of the Nation survey whitepaper.

# Note taking support

Respondents revealed how much of their department's work was on note taking support, and in what form this support takes.

The popularity of AT is clear, with **64.9% listing this as an accommodation they provide.**

However, peer notes still make up a significant percentage of note taking services offered.

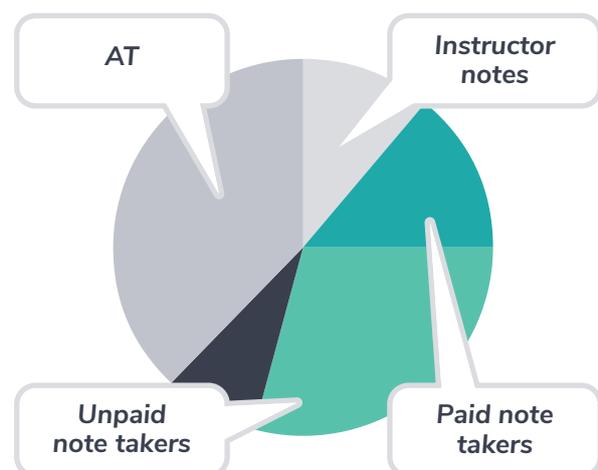


## What can we draw from this?

**Most institutions haven't yet gone all-in with AT.**

While a majority of departments now offer some kind of AT to their students, the results suggest that this is as part of a broader offering including peer notes.

**In fact, as this chart indicates, 43% use some kind of peer notes most widely in their institution:**



## What goals drive choice of accommodations?

We asked participants to choose their top goals for students seeking note taking support. The results show just how valued **student independence** is for disability support professionals.

To improve study skills

45.8%

To improve independence

73.2%

To capture all lecture information

49.7%

To give the student what they request

38.6%

Improving student independence is by far the most popular goal for respondents. This confirms what we've heard anecdotally for years - namely, that the goal of disability support should be to enable students to excel on their own terms.

## Money talks?

We asked participants to list the factors that influenced their choices of accommodations.

Cost

49%

Time saving

22.2%

What student requests

58.8%

Compliance with regulations

52.3%

Tried and tested methods

37.3%

**'Student requests' outweighs cost** as a factor in choosing an accommodation. Given the importance departments attach to independence, this stat becomes less surprising.

So how does this translate into accommodations offered? What do respondents believe about the tools their students currently access? And where do peer notes fit into this?

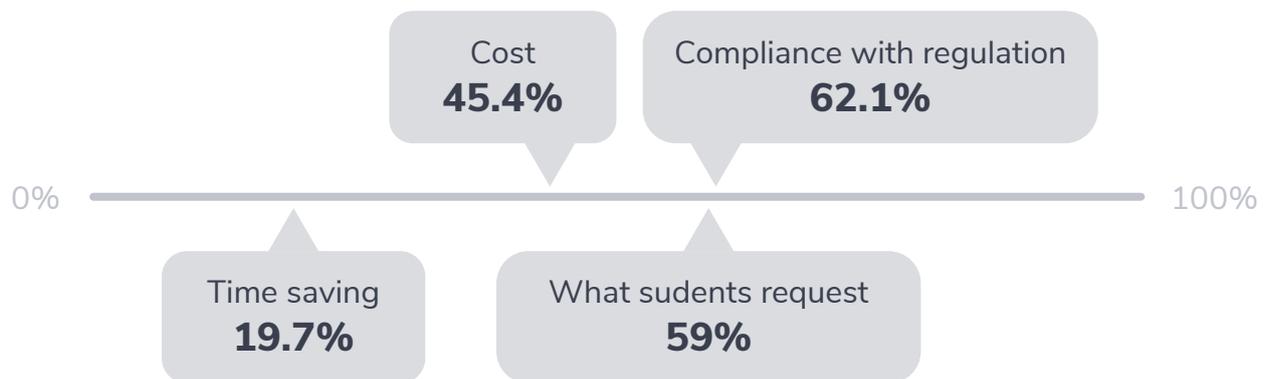


# Attitudes to peer notes

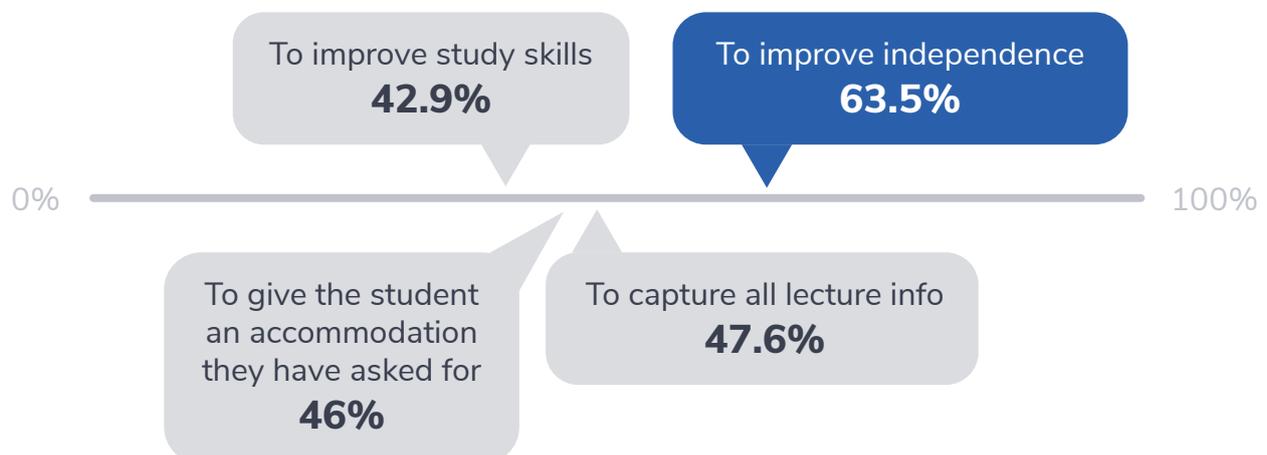
We wanted to know how the factors and goals influencing accommodation choice matched up with attitudes towards peer notes. We thought an interesting point of comparison would be between those who use peer notes most widely, and those who use AT most widely.

## ▼ Peer notes used most widely (43.4%)

**When choosing a note-taking accommodation, which of these do you consider most important?**

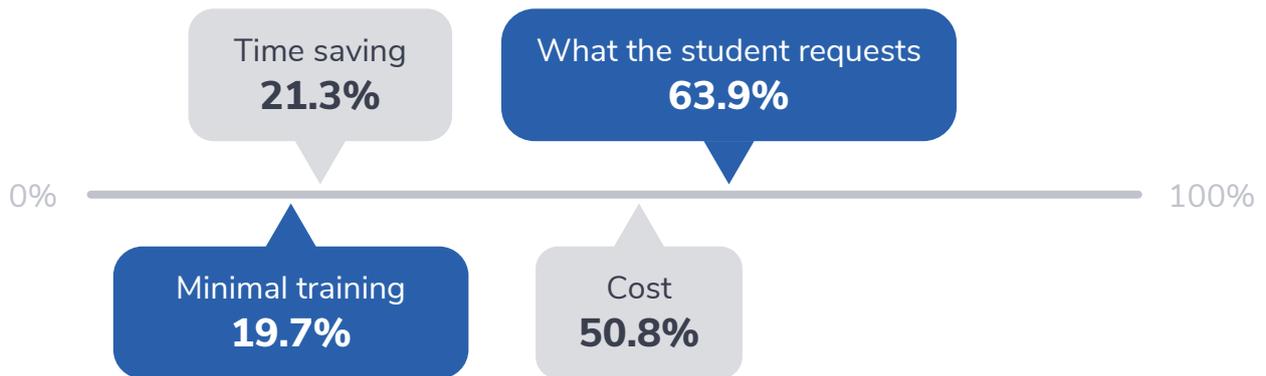


**What are your goals for the student?**

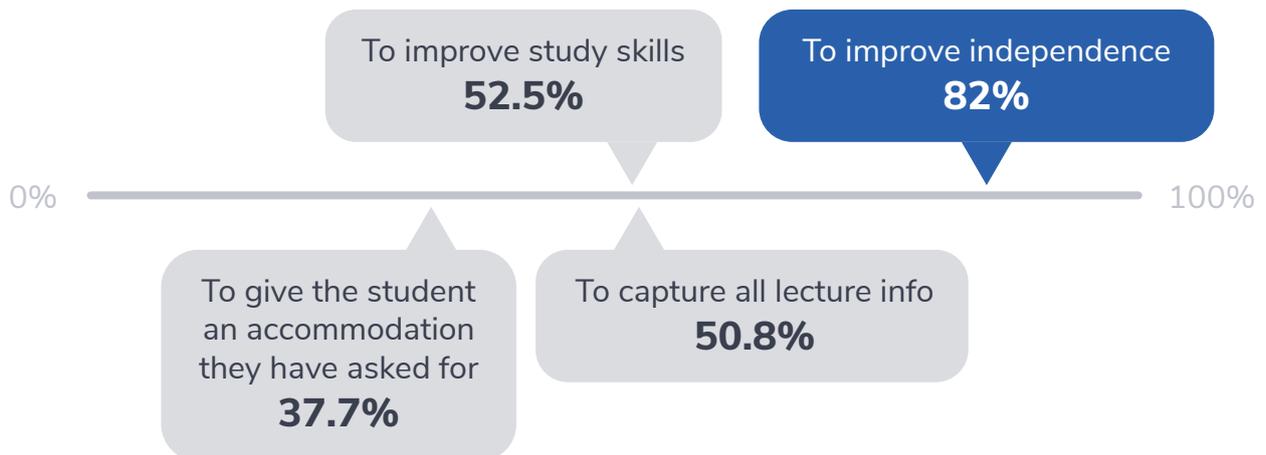


## ▼ AT used most widely (41.8%)

When choosing a note-taking accommodation, which of these do you consider most important?



What are your goals for the student?



# Attitudes to peer notes

## The strengths of peer notes

“Students who struggle to develop deeper understanding of the content can benefit from a peer's written interpretation of the class discussion.”

- Coordinator, VA

“Peer notetakers are great for those who can't identify key points (either don't write anything down or try to capture everything). They aren't great for students who just need more time to compose notes.”

- Coordinator, PA

“No matter the student situation it's usually helpful to have some notes from a peer so they can learn from another perspective of what occurred in class.”

- AT Specialist, Canada

“Students with significant learning and cognitive disabilities often have issues using other note taking tools or lack motor skills to take notes independently.”

- AT Specialist, ID

## Takeaways

Of the group using peer notes most widely, 'compliance with regulation' stands out as the most popular factor in choosing an accommodation, suggesting a view of peer notes as being a 'safe' option.

But given that **53.45% of this group also mentioned recruitment of note takers as the biggest challenge in administering peer notes**, with several respondents stating that it wasn't always possible to match students with note takers, it's clear the system isn't always a safe bet.

## Independence

Similarly, a majority of this group chose improving independence as a goal for their students. **But 57% of this group also either disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement ‘Peer notetakers improve student independence’.** This, versus 11% who either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement

## What does this tell us?

Clearly, there’s a mismatch between departmental goals and action at play. But this would mean nothing if there was no appetite for change.

So how content are this group with their notetaking support? And are they wanting to make any changes in the near future?

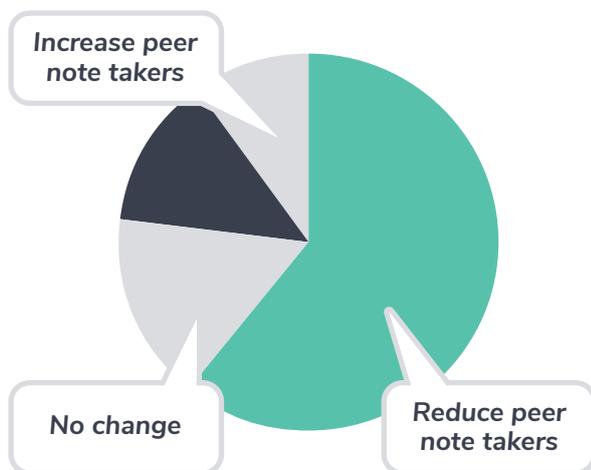
“...57% of this group also either disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement ‘Peer notetakers improve student independence’...”



# Thinking ahead

## ‘What are your plans for the next five years? And how will your note taking support change?’

Respondents shared their plans with us, and their answers reflect a desire to shift away from peer notes.



With **60.3%** indicating they'd like to **reduce the number of peer note takers in the next five years**, does this spell the beginning of the end for traditional support? Many respondents seem to think so.

*“Providing peer notetakers does not prep a student for the workforce in my opinion.”*

- Assistant Director, AZ

*“We are in the process of transitioning to audio software for everyone needing note taking assistance”*

- Direct Services Associate, DC

*“I would like to meet all notetaking accommodations through AT devices/software to provide students with disabilities the opportunity to take notes independently and in a way that is most effective for their learning experience.”*

- Assistant Director, DC

What's more, **53.85% of those who use peer notes most widely want to make similar decreases in this type of support.** Though this group is more divided on the issue, a majority in favour of reduction is still significant.

By contrast, **only 2 respondents who used AT most widely at their institution wanted to increase the use of peer notes over the next five years.**

## The verdict

Among our survey participants, it's clear that an appetite for change in note taking support is building. The next five years could see a real transformation in how departments work across North America if decision makers carry through their ambitions.

# What do students think?

With student requests ranking highly in their list of motivations for choosing accommodations, it's clear that departments appreciate input from those they serve.

We reached out to a number of students with experience of peer notes and AT support, asking them for their perspective on some of the issues we've outlined in this whitepaper.

For Samantha, depending on a peer for notes was a real source of frustration

*“It's really difficult to need to rely on someone else [...] but when it came to my own learning and my own note taking, I thought it was so important that I was able to capture the information. So peer notetakers were a form of anxiety for me as it reminded me that I struggle with this.”*

- **Samantha, Harvard**

Tech had a positive impact on attitudes to note-taking, too. From being a cause of anxiety and stress, note-taking became an integral part of learning.

*“Being able to note those important parts of the lesson and refer back to them is the best thing about note taking. It helps distill the most important information from the lesson in a way that's easy to come back to when you're preparing for a test or presentation.”*

- **Carla, NYU**

*“Being able to be self-sufficient and being able to say, ‘I've got this’ is really freeing”*

- **Hannah, University of Lynchburg**

If students are willing to discuss their study habits and goals, it suggests a high level of engagement and a confidence to speak that many other students lack.

While these testimonials represent a specific section of the student population, they also show why tech holds so much value for those regularly using it.

## The verdict

Independence is hugely important for these students, like it is for the staff that support them. And it's through **tech** that students, previously dependent on others for their learning, have come to take responsibility for their own learning.

By this point, you might have gathered we have a thing or two to say about this...

# Our two cents

Our position is clear - we believe that technology empowers students to be **more independent, engaged and active in the classroom**. And we know that it can have a powerful effect on students traditionally left to rely on peer notes.

That's not to say that we don't understand departments that do get value from peer note-taking services. The reality is that there will always be students that would prefer or would be better suited to direct support in note-taking from their peers.

However, the value of independent note taking has been demonstrated time and again. It's a life skill that is just as valuable in employment as it is in the classroom.

And we think that, if a student has the ability to take notes independently, we should give them the tools to do just that.

*“...the value of independent note taking has been demonstrated time and again. It's a life skill that is just as valuable in employment as it is in the classroom.”*



# Introducing Glean

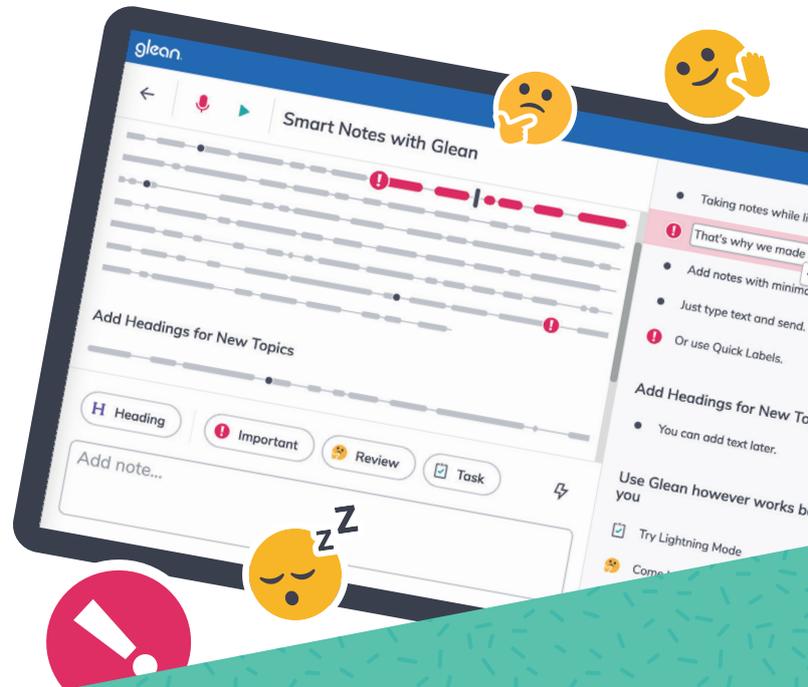
We take the issue of student independence very seriously.

It's why we developed our latest product, **Glean**.

By creating a simple, intuitive note taking web app, we're making it easier than ever for students to take control of their own learning.

Find out more about Glean by following this link:

[go.glean.co](https://go.glean.co)



## Free Glean Pilots

We're also offering you the chance to pilot Glean for free. For the rest of the semester, your students can benefit from distraction-free note taking.

And from what we've heard from institutions currently piloting Glean, it's helping departments realize their goals of reducing or eliminating peer notes

**82 of our recent pilot cohort gave improving independence and/or reducing peer notes as a reason for trying Glean.**

To talk to us about Glean and the free pilot program, follow the link below to set up a call with a member of our team. We'd love to hear from you!

[glean.sonocent.com/pilot](https://glean.sonocent.com/pilot)



## Tech the next step

Are you, like the majority of our survey participants,  
looking to shake up note taking support?

We'd love to hear your plans for the future, so why  
not get in touch?

**[community.sonocent.com](https://community.sonocent.com)**