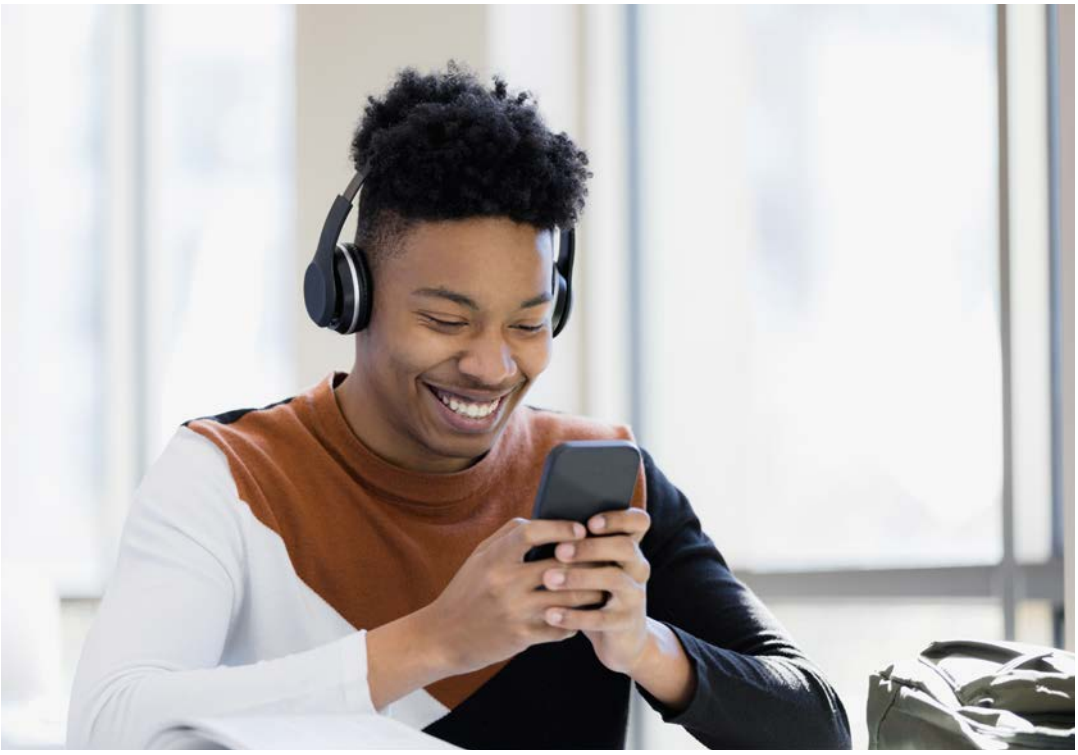
TRENDS SNAPSHOT

Creating a Seamless Online Student Experience



- Meet students where they are
- Collaborate across campus
- Cut through the clutter
- Personalize the support

For colleges that are struggling to meet enrollment goals and keep students feeling confident and engaged, it's never been more important to maintain an online presence that is welcoming and easy to navigate. After all, many of today's students are accustomed to immediate answers from digital assistants like Alexa or Siri and packages that arrive overnight from Amazon. They expect quick responses, and if they're bounced from office to office — virtual or not — the line reeling them in might snap. The connection to college is tenuous at best for students who question whether they can afford to continue, or whether the degree will pay off. If they're juggling child-care and job responsibilities, they can easily be knocked off course by missing transcripts, small unpaid bills, or confusing requirements.

In this Trends Snapshot, we'll look at some ways colleges are streamlining and personalizing their administrative websites and digital platforms to make students more likely to succeed. Even as admissions officers, registrars, student advisers, and tutors have returned to campus eager to welcome more students

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physically in their offices, most students prefer the flexibility of communicating online. Friendly faces and helpful road maps in the digital realm can go a long way toward persuading students that they belong in college.

Meet students where they are

When students are accepted at Bay Path University, a private, four-year institution in Longmeadow, Mass., peer mentors connect with them through Zoom chats, and students working with the Office of Multicultural Affairs invite them to online programs that celebrate their diverse backgrounds. Students are directed into discipline-specific virtual-learning communities where they're mentored by faculty and industry experts. Virtual tutoring is available 24 hours a day.

Proactive outreach is key. "Just because you build it doesn't mean they'll come," says Amanda Gould, vice president for learning innovation, technology and analytics. "It's important to meet them where they are." And where they are is a moving target. For the many women in their 30s attending the university's online American Women's College, that's often on the college's Facebook page, where students celebrate their accomplishments and pose in graduation regalia with their kids. It's a place where the college tries to cultivate a feeling of family.

There's no shortage of advice on how to engage those in their teens and early 20s. Dubbed Generation Z, these post-Millennials born after 1997 have spent virtually their entire lives in front of computer screens. A report by LeadSquared, a marketing company, advised that members of this cohort have short attention spans and expect instant feedback and personalized responses. It recommends that colleges text rather than email, schedule one-on-one meetings with students, and enliven pitches by appealing to them on Instagram.

Keeping students on the hook can involve something as simple as letting them start and finish the enrollment process with the one thing they rarely put down: their cellphones. Students can enroll in four online programs at Pepperdine University's Graduate School of Education and Psychology without ever having to log on to their laptops. That might not seem like a big deal, but simplifying and streamlining enrollment is key, says Luke Phillips, executive director of marketing and enrollment at the graduate school in Malibu, Calif.

"Every action you make a student take in the enrollment cycle causes them to be exponentially less likely to be in their seat on the first day of class," he says. The university enlisted the help of Emma, Perdia Education's artificial intelligence-powered mobile enrollment tool. Students who don't answer emails and don't have time for face-to-face meetings are more likely to respond and follow through on enrollment, advocates of the technology say, when the whole process fits in the palm of one hand.

With customized push notifications that pop up on their cellphones to alert them to deadlines or forms they need to turn in, Phillips says, "we're cutting through the clutter of the many ways we're all trying to reach students."

> **"Just because you build it doesn't mean they'll come. It's important to meet them where they are."**

Collaborate across campus

At Bay Path, staff members in advising, financial aid, housing, the registrar's office, and the faculty meet biweekly to compare notes on how students are faring. Working with the university's analytics team, they continuously fine-tune interventions. Students can search on their phones for information they need just in time, rather than being given "a boatload of information on Day 1" that they'll immediately forget, Gould says.

The university's approach is one of several

exemplary practices highlighted in a report published last year by NASPA — Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education. Advising has to be holistic today, says Amelia Parnell, the group's vice president for research and policy and an author of the report. It might need to include everything from academic and financial requirements to food and housing security, emotional well-being, and a sense of belonging.

A student who's thinking about majoring in early-childhood education, for instance, should be introduced early to on-the-job training opportunities, as well as realistic starting salaries and expected loan debt. Professionals across the campus should try to streamline their messages as much as possible so students receive the information they need when they need it, without overlapping and potentially confusing cross messages.

Expanding access to wraparound support services has been a top priority for the Borough of Manhattan Community College, given the many low-income and minority students who have been disproportionately devastated by the pandemic. That's included virtual programs on grief and loss, topics the college had focused heavily on following the 9/11 terrorist attacks, which brought down one of the college's own classroom buildings, located a few blocks from the World Trade Center.

The college, part of the City University of New York system, serves around 24,000 students, 70 percent of whose families earn $30,000 a year or less. It prides itself on the personalized support it offers students, many of them the first in their families to attend college.

"Our building is huge. When you see students walking around looking confused, we'll stop and ask if we can help them and walk them where they need to go," says Joseph Spadaro, vice president for information technology. With much of its communication now taking place online, the college is working to replicate virtually what Spadaro calls "the high touch that permeates the campus."

Cut through the clutter

The college has centralized its communication platforms to streamline and pare down the messages cluttering students' inboxes. With a few clicks, students can borrow laptop computers, reserve hot meals at a campus food pantry, attend a virtual career fair, and get real-time online tutoring.

Colleges sometimes seem to be chasing students from one social-media platform to another to make sure their messages are read. When 10 different offices are reminding them of deadlines and boxes that need to be checked, some students will tune out. To avoid information overload, divisions should coordinate their messaging, and potentially their delivery methods.

Students applying to Georgia State University, for instance, could easily become overwhelmed by the more than 500 student organizations they could join. Looking at students' applications and planned fields of study, the university automatically enrolls them in co-curricular clusters that help them zero in on those organizations they're most likely to be interested in.

At Houston Community College, students can log on to Zoom and enter a virtual lobby where they're sorted into breakout rooms based on their needs and given one-on-one support. The virtual lobby was developed during the pandemic, when the college was hit with a flood of emails and phone calls from confused and stressed-out students who were having to wait hours to speak to someone. The college's social-media accounts and advisers now direct students into that online lobby.

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Personalize the support

Students have come to expect a personalized experience, an Educause report on teaching and learning released in April points out. As colleges' artificial-intelligence capabilities continue to grow, the report notes, AI will go "beyond merely being a data tool to also being a constant companion and aid to students on the journey of learning and growing."

The trend taps into how many young people are already obtaining information in their daily lives. A sophomore studying in a dorm room might ask Alexa for help on a history question. If the college has a friendly virtual assistant to answer questions about financial-aid deadlines and career-fair sign-ups, it's a natural place for students to turn.

One way to make the information flow as seamless as possible is through chatbots, computer programs that use artificial intelligence to simulate human conversation online. California State University-Channel Islands, a Hispanic-serving public institution in Southern California, launched Admithub's bot, Ekhobot, in 2019 as a way to support first-time and transfer students. As classes were moved online during the pandemic, the tool, named for the university's dolphin mascot, Ekho, was extended to all undergraduates, to help them in virtual learning.

Ekhobot was designed with a knowledge base about the university, and it gets smarter as more questions are asked and correctly answered. "Just like your other AI friends Alexa and Siri, Ekhobot loves to help and can answer your questions 24/7!" the bot's welcome page announces. "Ekhobot will also send you messages throughout the school year about upcoming dates, announcements, campus services, and just to make sure you're doing okay."

Before the chatbot was introduced, "students were getting inundated with so many communications, and it was hard to sift through what was important and what wasn't," says Michelle Hasendonckx, interim assistant vice president for student success and equity initiatives. Far from a nagging parent or a cold automaton, the university's bot, she says, "is kind of your reliable go-to pal, someone who wants the best for you, wants to be sure you're informed, but having fun in the process." It can tell jokes and make fun of itself, and when it's stumped, it refers a student to a live person who's always behind the bot.

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Ascendium Education Group is excited to support The Chronicle of Higher Education's initiative to prioritize student success. Throughout the duration of the project, this partnership will produce special virtual events, focused reports and a new online resource center, where colleges can search and find creative solutions and useful content from The Chronicle's extensive archives of best practices.

Our support of this project promises a comprehensive look at new and innovative approaches to helping students achieve success. By collecting voices and perspectives from across higher education, The Chronicle's expert journalists can guide colleges to make actionable changes that will help close achievement gaps and fulfill the promise of socioeconomic mobility for all students.

Ascendium supports initiatives that seek to create large-scale change so more learners from low-income backgrounds can achieve their educational and career goals. We share with The Chronicle a passion and purpose to inform and empower higher education trustees, leaders, administrators and faculty members about the pressing issues facing students today. That includes shining a light on students of color and transfer students, as well as those who are the first in their family to attend college.

We believe in the power of education and training beyond high school to transform the lives of learners from low-income backgrounds. The COVID-19 health crisis has exacerbated well-documented opportunity gaps that put these learners at a disadvantage relative to their peers. This makes the solutions raised by this initiative all the more vital.

Thank you for your interest in this initiative. To learn more about Ascendium, please subscribe to our monthly newsletter.

Sincerely,

Amy Kerwin
Vice President – Education Philanthropy
Ascendium Education Group