

A New Focus on the Student Experience



- Expanding the virtual campus
- Appointing student-success advisory teams
- Safeguarding mental health and well-being
- Helping all students feel they belong
- Promoting career readiness

A projected nationwide drop in enrollment, along with lessons learned from the pandemic, has led many colleges to rethink the entire student experience — from applicant to alumnus.

Attracting and retaining Gen Z students, those born between the mid-1990s and early 2010s, isn't easy. The nation's colleges are enrolling growing numbers of students from diverse racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. The 2019 [Freshman Survey](#) conducted by the Higher Education Research Institute

at the University of California at Los Angeles found that nearly one-fifth of students at four-year colleges said they were the first in their families to go to college, while more than 12 percent of respondents described themselves as gay, lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, queer, or asexual. Two-year colleges, which are more likely to enroll underserved, older, and nontraditional students, and which have seen the largest enrollment declines during the pandemic, face additional challenges in helping their students succeed.



Anyone paying attention in recent years has seen the landscape of higher education reshaped. No doubt, the pandemic drastically altered the familiar campus experience, but there is more in play, including national events, the ongoing influence of social media, and broader questions about the value of a liberal arts and sciences education.

Even in this changing landscape, I find that one of the joys of being the president at the University of South Carolina is the opportunity to share my enthusiasm for all we have to offer students on our campus. I particularly like to intercept visiting groups of high school students and their parents while they're touring our picturesque campus to tell them my favorite point of pride: our top-ranked first-year experience, the best among the nation's public universities.

A key element of that success is our University 101 freshman seminar, created 50 years ago to help incoming students meet the challenges of college life. It has become a model for higher education institutions across the country and a cornerstone of our National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition. Students who start their South Carolina journey with U101 consistently experience higher first-year success rates, six-year graduation rates and first-year GPAs.

And that's just a first step toward ensuring that our students feel welcomed and supported on campus. As our student body becomes increasingly diverse, with more nontraditional students, our focus holds true. Every student who comes to South Carolina becomes part of the Gamecock family, connected for life with more than 325,000 alumni worldwide. In everything we do at South Carolina, we understand that each one of us is uplifted when all of us work together.

On campus – both in and out of the classroom – our students discover a world of pathways to anywhere they want to go, with more than 300 different degree options, including 100 health science and health professions programs and more than 60 nationally ranked academic programs, plus over 500 clubs and organizations for exploring unique interests.

We love our traditions here, but we're also adapting to the changing needs of our students. Because we know wellness is essential to student success, we built a 68,000-square-foot Center for Health and Well-Being designed not only to meet essential health needs, but also to help reduce stress and anxiety. Through our innovative Center for Integrative and Experiential Learning, we give students opportunities for internships, community service, research and international study experiences that help them develop as well-rounded critical thinkers, prepared to succeed in a globally connected future. We meet learners where they are, offering online degree programs and On Your Time accelerated-study programs.

We are not standing still while higher education changes around us. Two centuries old and counting, the University of South Carolina is evolving with new challenges, and we welcome the next Gamecocks who will thrive in our supportive and remarkable community.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "H. Pastides".

Harris Pastides
Interim President
University of South Carolina

Reaching a diverse and demanding student body requires colleges to reallocate resources to address students' needs holistically, says Jonathan Gagliardi, an assistant vice chancellor for the City University of New York. "Everybody is rolling their sleeves up and serving students in more ways," he says.

Colleges are ramping up academic support, offering mental-health services, and even helping students with the basics, such as food, child care, school supplies, tech tools, and internet access. The pivot to remote learning and online support early in the pandemic helped colleges see that many emergency measures have long-term benefits, but also compelled them to better understand what students valued most in their college experience.

Perhaps most important, colleges are working harder to help graduates join the work force. To that end, parents are demanding that their tuition dollars — and students' debt — have a tangible payoff. And colleges still face a skeptical public: 60 percent of adults between ages 18 and 34 said a four-year degree was worth the cost, according to a 2019 [survey](#).

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If holistic support leads to higher graduation rates — the results are still too early to measure — successful students will be [more likely to be employed and earn higher salaries](#) over the course of their careers.

Here are five major areas in which colleges are reshaping the student lifecycle.

Expanding the Virtual Campus

The pandemic triggered a sudden shift to remote learning. Now many colleges see long-term benefits to new or expanded online platforms.

"One thing we've learned is that we can do a lot of things virtually that we never could before," says Laurie Fladd, a director of holistic student supports at [Achieving the Dream](#), a

nonprofit organization that helps colleges implement strategic changes.

Many colleges now offer prospective students [virtual campus tours](#), with 3-D images of buildings, facilities, and housing, as well as multimedia perspectives from current students. Those who decide to attend can opt for virtual orientation and onboarding. In a 2021 [report on innovations in higher education](#) by Naspa — Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education, advisers at Bay Path University, in Longmeadow, Mass., said virtual orientation sessions enabled them to have more meaningful one-on-one discussions with new students than large, in-person events on campus.

Once enrolled, many students can "attend" live classes online or replay them later, a benefit to remote learners in other time zones. Students who are struggling with their coursework can go online to schedule appointments with their faculty advisers and even receive tutoring services.

Still, while virtual resources offer flexibility and convenience, they are often delivered via a confusing array of apps, widgets, and tools, each with a different user interface. Ideally, many institutions would like to offer a single portal for students who have questions or need help of any kind. To that end, Houston Community College created a "virtual lobby" that lets students call in by phone or log in with a device to undergo an initial screening. The responses identify which services are needed, and students are then directed to a breakout room for a one-on-one session with a staff member. Similarly, San Diego State University offers resources through both live chats with staffers and automated support via chatbots.

Realizing that some remote learners didn't have the hardware and/or internet access during the pandemic, many colleges provided loaner laptops and Wi-Fi hotspots. Those efforts are likely to continue to ensure equal access to the entire student body.

Appointing Student-Success Advisory Teams

Campuses offer plenty of resources to students in need: academic advisers, health clinicians, financial-aid officers, and resident assistants, to name a few. But that support is often disparate and disjointed.

“Students need help making sense of things. You can’t leave it to all of these distal units around campus,” says Ashley Finley, vice president for research at the American Association of Colleges and Universities.

In what she calls a paradigm shift, colleges increasingly are grouping interdisciplinary advisers into collaborative teams that address student needs holistically. What’s more, teams can use data analytics with a real-time dashboard to proactively intervene before a problem becomes a crisis.

For example, as part of its [Student Success Programs](#), Georgia State University monitors real-time engagement data so advisers can reach out to students who aren’t participating in their online courses. The Borough of Manhattan Community College tracks and contacts students who aren’t opening or replying to text messages.

Safeguarding Mental Health and Well-Being

Many colleges have seen an uptick in demand for mental-health services since the outbreak of the pandemic. A 2021 [survey conducted by Healthy Minds](#) found that 34 percent of student respondents had an anxiety disorder and 41 percent had depression. But mental health was a growing concern even before Covid-19 struck, says Amelia Parnell, vice president for research and policy at Nاسpa. Many institutions have ramped up their efforts, offering one-on-one counseling and support groups both in person and online.

Preventive and ongoing care has also become a priority. Georgia State offers programs that teach stress management, meditation, and how to spot red flags of an unhealthy relationship. Ithaca College’s Office of Religious and Spiritual Life hosts midweek gatherings to enable the community to pause and reflect.

These efforts are part of “building a relationship and showing a student that someone cares about them,” says Achieving the Dream’s Fladd.


Well-being extends beyond mental health to include basic needs, such as food, housing for homeless students, emergency financial help, and child-care support. In the past, responsibility to meet such needs commonly fell outside the boundaries of

campus support. Now colleges recognize that meeting basic needs can help students better succeed academically. “If you’re hungry or unable to pay your bills, it’s hard to pursue an education,” says CUNY’s Gagliardi. During the pandemic, the Borough of Manhattan Community College created an in-house reservation system for students and their families to obtain packaged and hot meals from the college’s food pantry.

Helping All Students Feel They Belong

More and more, students are expressing their need for a sense of belonging and purpose. A recent *Chronicle* report, [“The Future of Gen Z,”](#) and a number of surveys and experts have discussed that trend.

“It’s important to create a sense of belonging for adult learners and student parents, as well as an 18-year-old traditional student,” Fladd says. A major challenge is helping all students — regardless of their interests and background — feel that they fit in.



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During the pandemic, students expressed strong interest in being part of a community. UCLA’s [2020 freshman survey](#) found that 90 percent of the respondents said they believed there was at least some chance they would participate in a club or group. When colleges went virtual, they created platforms where students could join clubs and affinity groups, as well as connect with peers who shared similar interests. Activities like virtual movie festivals and online fitness and cooking classes aimed to create a broader sense of community.

Longer term, a number of institutions offer programming that emphasizes group participation, outings, and activities. For example, Marymount California University encourages students to explore more than 20 campus clubs, such as Latinos Unidos

and the drama club. To help students bond, the university promotes campus cookouts, discount days at Disneyland, theatrical productions like Cirque du Soleil, and faculty-led trips around Los Angeles.

Meanwhile, campus culture itself is under the microscope. For example, as colleges try to create a welcoming climate for students of all backgrounds, many institutions are examining aspects of campus life such as building names and the way in which students are initially welcomed, says Naspas's Parnell. "Campuses are going more boldly with what they do: inclusivity training, workshops, speakers to address race and racism."

They're also examining how their policies may have a disparate impact on different student groups. Ensuring diversity and inclusivity is an effort "that has the slowest movement, but it has the biggest impact," Parnell says.

Promoting Career Readiness

In a key takeaway, UCLA's 2019 freshman survey found that landing a good job was the most important reason students gave for going to college. And because college is a major expense for many families, parents want to make sure their children can eventually support themselves and repay student debt.

To that end, colleges are rethinking how students can showcase their skills, academic research, internships, and other work experience to future employers. Some colleges are enabling students to earn "badges" for completing training on skills like leadership

and research techniques. Northern Arizona University offers rewards like raffles, stress-relief toys, T-shirts, and water bottles to students who earn multiple badges.

Badges are part of a larger push to document a student's competence beyond grades. "A transcript is anachronistic," says the AAC&U's Finley. "It's all in course code, and it hides collaborative work, learning experiences, and group projects."

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Elon University provides students with an "[experiences transcript](#)," which records a student's participation in five specific areas, including study-abroad programs, civic service, and internships. Similarly, ePortfolios allow students to curate and document their achievements. Currently in the pilot phase are [Comprehensive Learner Records](#), co-developed by Naspas and the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers. The digital records provide secure, verified documentation of students' learning inside and outside the classroom to highlight career-related skills and abilities.

*"A New Focus on the Student Experience" was produced by Chronicle Intelligence.
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Two little letters. One big word. An entire academic philosophy that revolves around a simple premise: When **we** stand for something bigger than ourselves, **we** can create a world that benefits all.

#1

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