Using Tech to Help Students Succeed

- **Repurposing customer-relationship management systems**

- **Rejiggering a variety of systems**

- **Using data to monitor students**

- **Emphasizing change management**

As the long-term enrollment outlook continues to appear grim for many colleges, keeping the students they already have has become a priority. Two elements have emerged as linchpins in today's retention strategies: student-success programs and cutting-edge technology.

Colleges greatly amped up tech investments last year, research shows, reversing a five-year drop in spending on student-information systems. Nearly three in four college leaders reported that their institution increased its investments in student-success technology, according to a 2021 poll conducted by Educause, a nonprofit that promotes the use of information

Every learner deserves to thrive – whomever and wherever they are.

To help learners thrive in today's hybrid campus-and-virtual college communities, we need to integrate tightly all forms of digital and in-person support: academics, advising, counseling, financial aid, and beyond. Nobody should fall between the cracks, so every function and every team member must work together seamlessly.

We've all seen the passion that student support professionals bring to their work. But they've often been hobbled by inadequate tools, technologies, and processes. Thankfully, that's changing fast. Spurred by COVID-19 and other macro trends, institutions are coordinating in-person and digital support in exciting new ways. They're using new technologies and practices to serve learners with greater speed, relevance, and effectiveness.

COVID-19 proved just how fast higher education institutions can pivot. Now it's time to fully operationalize what we've learned. Real-time advisor chat? Yes, please. Walk-in virtual advising? Of course. Texts nudging students to register for next term? Always.

Consumer-grade learner experiences like these are now mainstays in our new blended environments. Learners demand them. As higher education speeds toward an inflection point, with short-form credentials from nontraditional providers increasingly competing with traditional degrees, meeting learners' needs requires a laser-like focus on innovation in response to market forces. We can't ever be tempted to step back from anytime/anywhere access to student success services in the name of "back to normal."

At Pearson, we see powerful learner-centered innovation every day in our work with pioneering institutions across North America. It doesn't just enable better outcomes: It's a key step toward a rebirth of confidence in the entire enterprise of higher education.

To that end, we're excited to sponsor this Trends Snapshot, and to share it with you. Once you've read it, let's discuss our mutual experiences and ideas for helping learners succeed in today's world. My colleagues and I never forget: That's why we're all here.

Sasha Thackaberry, Ph.D.
Vice President of Student
and Partner Services
Pearson Online Learning Services

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technology in higher education. (Only 6 percent said that such spending decreased.)

While more-precise data on the level of institutional spending on student-success software does not exist, colleges have clearly begun to see digital tools as the best way to coordinate systems that help students do better, whether they are studying remotely or on campus, says Laura Gogia, an independent higher-education consultant.

An umbrella term that covers a host of services, "student success" helps students navigate their way through the typical thicket of campus life, with an eye toward improving their sense of well-being and academic performance.

Such services include providing students with better access to and increased support from academic advisers, financial-aid officers, health and mental-health services, the registrar's office, and tutors. And those efforts are often augmented with metrics that help colleges monitor and predict student performance. Such data sets can help institutions intervene when a student shows signs of struggling with classwork.

Student success is hardly a new concept. It has been front of mind for college leaders for at least a decade, though the brunt of the pandemic temporarily slowed the pace of progress toward achieving it. The race to provide education via newly created hybrid learning environments took precedence over the focus on measuring and improving student performance.

Yet in the end, the response to Covid-19 did provide a reset of sorts for student-success efforts. After witnessing how digital technologies helped link students to services during campus lockdowns, many colleges have used federal relief funds to build out systems that reflect a more holistic approach to success — one that can help keep students on track, healthy, and learning.

"We're at the point where we're past the hype phase on student success. We've passed through the disillusionment phase of the pandemic. And now we're moving into an era when it's generally understood that we need to do this," says Vince Kellen, chief information officer at the University of California at San Diego.

Here are some trends that match student-success efforts with technology to help students do the best they can:

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Repurposing customer-relationship management systems

Providing almost-instant online access to students remains a priority for institutions. So do systems that can go even further by personalizing data for each student to inform them of the classes they need to graduate or to keep track of all the contacts they have made with various campus offices. Finding a platform that can cover all those bases is at the top of many campus tech officials' wish lists.

But most colleges can't afford the cost of the few products available, which can run into millions of dollars over several years, in software purchases and licensing fees. And some headaches in far-reaching student-information systems that have attempted to provide many of those functions have made large, stand-alone, and cloud-based platforms suspect in the eyes of some.

Colleges see opportunities for innovation, however. To get some of the same functionality as an overarching platform without having

to break their budgets, tech managers are leveraging the technology they already have on hand to improve student success.

Many colleges have worked to expand customer-relationship management systems (CRMs) that combine apps, databases, and spreadsheets to amass information on students and provide them with better access to services. Long used as admissions and enrollment tools, CRMs are now being put to work more often to manage student data and monitor progress toward a degree.

At the University of California at San Diego, officials have expanded the use of its CRM while adding student case-management programs and data-warehousing capability. According to the Educause poll from 2021, colleges cited CRMs as the student-success technology on which they would most likely spend more money.

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By reconfiguring CRMs, colleges can also eliminate data silos that keep college offices from communicating effectively with one another, while making it easier for students to make appointments, access services, and keep in touch with faculty members and other students.

Rejiggering a variety of systems

The idea of a "one-stop shop" that allows students to contact virtually any office within an institution through one portal remains a goal for many colleges. By offering students tech portals that link them to support services, colleges will be better able to help students deal with issues and problems quickly. Such ideal systems would also provide colleges with a centralized case-management capability that would help students in need.

But to get there, institutions are learning that they may have to refashion a handful of systems they already have. Colleges are combining the functions of a bevy of software programs and platforms — everything from CRMs to learning-management platforms to data storage — to make their online services easier to navigate and to improve how they communicate with students.

Software companies are helping colleges integrate far-flung systems, often adding features that help colleges improve their retention strategies, such as precise student-engagement analytics and personalized automated alerts from existing tools.

While tech consolidation provides a solution for some institutions, the number of highly specialized software products colleges use makes the task a hard one. Getting data from dozens of different systems gathered in one place and correlating it in a useful way remains a challenge for many institutions.

"We need vendors to share their trade secrets with other vendors so we can figure out how to link these technologies up for maximum effect, but that isn't happening," says Timothy M. Renick, executive director of the National Institute for Student Success at Georgia State University. "We're not there yet."

Using data to monitor students

Systems that provide colleges with the tools to send personalized alerts to students about appointments, campus news, and degree requirements have emerged as key tech pieces. Analytics that combine several data points that can help colleges zero in on students in need are also growing in popularity.

Georgia State and its student-success institute have emerged as evangelists for such analytics, which are designed to learn when students are getting off track and to offer them specific kinds of help to get back on. The university monitors students' classroom performance, attendance, and 800 other data sets that can pick up risk factors for failure. It sends out 100,000 messages a month to "nudge" students toward filling out forms or attending an online class.

> **Chatbots and other AI tools that can direct large numbers of students toward services or help them fill out financial-aid forms are also becoming more common. Such tools can help colleges reach more students faster, while keeping staff free to meet with students and solve more complex problems.**

Georgia State credits such tracking metrics and the services and personalized attention they trigger with increasing its graduation rate by 23 percentage points over the past decade. Analysis of a separate set of jobs data helps incoming students make better-informed decisions on their majors, by clarifying which careers will be offering more opportunities in the future.

The university was also an early adopter of artificial-intelligence-based systems that promote student success. Chatbots and other AI tools that can direct large numbers of students toward services or help them fill out

financial-aid forms are also becoming more common. Such tools can help colleges reach more students faster, while keeping staff free to meet with students and solve more complex problems.

Colleges that focused on buying and integrating data-analytics software before the pandemic have seen their students benefit greatly during the Covid years, Renick says, adding that many more are now following suit.

Emphasizing change management

Colleges are learning that undergoing sweeping digital transformation requires more than just tech and tech experts. They must also emphasize guiding students and staff through the many changes they'll ask them to make.

Getting effective student-success strategies that rely on data and devices requires overcoming several hurdles perceived by students, who often report that they don't trust college data practices, or that using unreliable college technology is stressful.

To get student buy-in, colleges are more likely now to move forward with data gathering and analysis only after dealing with those concerns, experts say.

Two years ago, the Ohio Association of Community Colleges and the Ada Center, a nonprofit group that helps higher-education leaders navigate technology decisions, polled students at five Ohio institutions about how technology could help them on their path to degrees.

Students who responded listed several concerns, including emails going into "black holes" without being answered and inaccurate information on college websites.

The survey results helped guide the 23 member institutions of the OACC on how to develop systems based on success that the students would want to use, says Laura Rittner, executive director of the OACC's Success Center.

Another downside to the consolidation and purchase of new success-focused technologies is that costs often slow down professional development for staff, depriving them of vital training.

Such training is necessary as institutions look to put new tech in place and break down silos between offices, Rittner adds. Even as colleges become more aware of strategies to manage change, they need to make sure they are properly funded.

To get people across campus thinking about interweaving strategies for student success with technology, some institutions are creating governance bodies, such as success committees, or reorganizing their academic offices so that success is at the center of their approach to students, Gogia, the consultant, says.

> **"At the heart of every change process is people."**

"At the heart of every change process is people," says Jenay Robert, a researcher at Educause. "The challenge here is in unifying people in a traditionally siloed sector. As colleges adopt and adapt these technologies, they'll need to make sure their people will be on board."

"Using Tech to Help Students Succeed" was produced by Chronicle Intelligence.
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