



KEY TAKEAWAYS

What's Next for Using Data to Support Students?





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Higher education is swimming in data. We have data about the courses students take, the grades they get, feedback on their instructors, the activities students are involved with outside the classroom, their housing, the jobs they get after graduation, and more. We have employee data, financial data, financial aid data, work study data, career center data, building usage data, alumni data, and more. The problem? That wealth of data is often siloed, difficult to move and to analyze with any speed and accuracy, hindering leaders from making informed decisions on how best to deliver on their mission.

As a former associate provost, I saw this data problem firsthand. At the start of my career, data was presented in binders full of paper, usually generated for accreditation visits. Later, even when paper was replaced with digital data, it was still difficult to use it for decision-making. My team in the registrar's office, who produced much of the data, struggled to put it all together for analysis with the tools provided. Reports took weeks, if not months, leading to reactive rather than proactive actions. And now, in an era where students and staff expect personalized, real-time support, institutions need modern data tools to meet their missions.

Workday is the AI enterprise platform for people, money, students, and agents. Having your core employee, finance, and student data in one unified platform helps solve the data silo problem. And our AI agents work side-by-side with your staff and faculty, helping them analyze that data more quickly and efficiently. For example, our Student Administration Agent available in 2026, will aid your teams as they work with transcript, student record, and academic requirements data, freeing up valuable time for them to focus on supporting student success. The results of having your data in Workday's platform? Just ask the team at the University of Arkansas System. Using the financial dashboards in Workday, they were able to analyze their electricity expenditures across the system, go out to RFP, and secure a solar contract that will save them \$100 million over the next 25 years. But the best part? It's that they're now able to use those funds to support student success and scholarships.

Workday is proud to sponsor webinars with The Chronicle of Higher Education like this one. Sharing insights, learnings, and key takeaways with one another is core to the industry and helps us all deliver on our missions—supporting student success.

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What's Next for Using Data to Support Students?

Key Takeaways From a Virtual Forum
Presented by *The Chronicle* and Workday

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Collecting and analyzing data has transformed student-success efforts. First, student-information systems and institutional dashboards made enrollment, retention, and graduation data more accessible. Then, advances in predictive analytics and machine learning empowered institutions to anticipate students' needs and shape personalized interventions. Now advisers can track students' academic progress in real time and offer targeted support services. Mental-health professionals can measure the use of their services and tailor support to the needs of specific student populations.

Still, challenges remain. Becoming a data-informed campus can feel like an endless task, especially as technology changes. To explore how the use of data to support student success will continue to evolve — and how technologies like generative AI will shape that evolution — *The Chronicle* held a virtual forum on December 2. The following comments, edited for clarity and length, represent key takeaways from the forum. To hear the full discussion, watch the recorded webinar [here](#).

Ian Wilhelm: How have your institutions used data to help students thrive?

Tiffany Mfume: We've used students' data from the time they're admitted, through their transition to our institution, as they're onboarded as freshman, and as they're in advising. There's so much data, and we have to make sure it's available, actionable, and used to inform our decisions as we curate an individualized experience for every student. We love it when Amazon

knows what we want to buy or when Netflix knows what shows we want to binge, and we want to treat students' experience like that — knowing what courses they should be ready to register for and whether they're registered, being able to assign them to an adviser and target them for specific scholarships opportunities. Students shouldn't have to raise their hands to get support.

Mark David Milliron: We think about how to use the best of data science, design thinking, and domain expertise together to make a difference. You have to get clean, solid data — qualitative and quantitative, pulled together in the right way — and get it to the right people with the right tools and techniques.

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There's a lot of wisdom to gain from students, advisers, and faculty members who want to use the data. You need to understand who you're trying to serve. At National University, we serve about 50,000 students a year — about a third for doctorates, a third for master's degrees, a third for bachelor's degrees. All of our students are nontraditional, working, or military students. They may be students and parents, students and employed, or students and deployed. It's a design challenge to support these folks: How do we connect them to learning tools, resources, and strategies as well as to each other and professionals in their fields and transformational experiences?

Kate Giovacchini: In a world of cloud computing, we have infinite space to store infinite data. The question now is what to do with it. The Trusted Learner Network is a way to take data we've organized and put it in the hands of students.

Think about students who might stop out in their junior year. They need to put college on hold. Those students have demonstrable experience and expertise. They have a story about what their college life has been. Digital credentials are all about being able to retell that story to others — say, for a job interview — and to themselves. They can say, “Well, based on all the evidence I've collected from my university, I've really learned a lot about these subject areas, even if I haven't graduated.”

Wilhelm: How is the use of data going to evolve over the next five or 10 years?

Mfume: In higher ed, we typically say things like, “We have space for 12 students to go on this trip” or “We have this event for students who'd like to come.” The next level, to me, is saying to a student, “We believe you'd be great for this experience. You're prequalified. We've looked at your major and grades, and you'd be perfect for this. We've already identified funding for you.” It's about reaching out to students proactively, based on all the data we have about them, to recommend things we believe would be in their best interest for their success, including post-graduation outcomes.

We use many platforms and vendors, and they've already begun to allow their systems to exchange data so we don't need workarounds to get some from one system and some from another. Let's remove barriers that are there for no reason.

Milliron: When dedicated educators and data-rich environments come together, it's almost like they have a superpower to better understand students and guide them on a learning journey that helps them get radically better. The next step is to help them head into their

careers. We now have the opportunity — especially with low-income, first-generation students going on very complex learning journeys — to bring insight to help them make the most of it. We're connecting our educators with training in the culture of the military so they understand how to deal with military students.

A lot of the data strategies out there are pretty reductionistic. They're about how to get students to persist and complete, which is wildly important but also a low bar. We should want students to suck the marrow out of these experiences — to get everything they possibly can out of them. I want to figure out how we can use data to help people optimize their time in education, not just meet minimum requirements.

Giovacchini: Data is the outcome of a relationship between an institution and a student. Historically, we've used it in an aggregated way — we've flattened it to fit it into databases — but the future is to move beyond “How many of my students persisted in this particular course?” We have the opportunity to ask, “What event sequences precede withdrawal?” or “Which courses are most likely to lead to a drop in retention?” Let's talk about which peer networks or clubs are correlated with persistence and how we understand that.

Milliron: The value, which we design for, is how to optimize credential attainment that opens doors and makes connections that change lives — students to students, students to faculty, students to professionals. Often it's those experiences that are transformational — internships, clinical experiences. That means using data differently, because we're not just trying to help them finish courses.

Wilhelm: How should institutional leaders approach managing data, including cleaning it up and creating good data warehouses?

Milliron: We had to have hard conversations with our IT team and other folks about going back to do work on our data governance and data definitions. We didn't even have a highly functioning data warehouse. I said, “Folks, we have to fix the plumbing. It's going to take us between six months and a year, but we have to do it, and we have to include broader

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constituencies across our organization.”
Going two steps backward let us go five steps forward. Within a year and a half, our board had a data dashboard they’d wanted for 20 years.

Wilhelm: How do you all think about the issue of data privacy — balancing the ability to make helpful, personalized recommendations with the need to ensure that students don’t feel like their digital footprints are being watched too closely?

Mfume: It’s important to distinguish here between data about students — their demographic profiles, majors, and grades — and data from students. A lot of privacy concerns involve the data about students, which might also include data about their finances and high-school history, but students are more open about data we collect from them, including through surveys. We ask them all these questions — from “How’s the food?” to “Where are you going after college?” — and they want to know what we’re doing with that data. You can build trust and confidence by telling students, or faculty and staff members, “We asked you these questions, and these were your responses in the aggregate, and we used those responses to make these decisions.”

We even do little things, like using a chatbot that only does SMS text messages, asking students, “What song are you listening to?” and then sending them back a Fall 2025 playlist based on their responses. The more you share back data you get from them, the more the “creepy” factor goes away.

Wilhelm: How will AI change all this?

Milliron: We believe it’s educational malpractice not to analyze which AI tools may need to be used by which graduates — by folks coming out of criminal-justice programs or nursing programs or teaching programs, for instance. Do they have familiarity with the tools related to those disciplines? We want them to learn about AI and with AI, and we’ve got to think about how we can use AI as an institution to better support them. We want to make sure they see how we’re using it — being responsible and building trust — and how human

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and artificial intelligence can work together to do amazing things, as well as understanding the challenges and ethical implications. We've got to do a lot of trying, testing, and tuning.

Giovacchini: For credentials, AI is a killer app. When we give students strong, metadata-rich versions of their credentials, and they're verifiable, they get to carry those around. What's really cool is when learners can bounce that rich data against LLMs that might be trained for educational support, career-seeking, or skill-building. Imagine a world where every student has an educational or career coach, which can communicate with them constantly using very personalized information about themselves.

LLMs aren't natively good with data — they're natively good with language — so it's important to ask, “How good is your metadata? How good are your data dictionaries? How effective are you at describing your data so an LLM could meaningfully traverse it?” It's also about documenting your processes — how your institution works — so an LLM can see that, and piping data from all your key systems into a single place to use with AI.

This Key Takeaways was produced by Chronicle Intelligence.
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