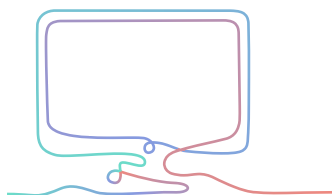Higher Education Guide to Modern Portals

Meet Students Where They Are: Embracing the Digital Age

Embracing the New Reality

Many institutions have expressed concern because COVID-19 has negatively impacted enrollment numbers. Several factors are contributing to this drop in enrollment.

While we don't know the final statistics yet, we can count on lower enrollment and higher student attrition in 2020. More students are feeling a financial strain than last year, and life has been odd by any stretch of the imagination. Between civil unrest, a pandemic, and a recession, people (faculty included) are worn out.

However, with an undergraduate dropout rate of 40% in the United States pre-COVID, we can hardly say that student retention wasn't an issue before. Don't interpret this as a negative statement on our part. Campus.app believes universities can overcome some of the recent student acquisition loss and improve attrition rates with the right tools.

It's time to try something different.

Factors Contributing to Drop in Enrollment

→ Students previously supporting themselves through college face **unemployment**

→ High-risk prospective and existing students are **unwilling to attend school in person**

→ **Family emergencies** have impacted students

→ Students who highly value the college social experience **don't see the point in remote education**

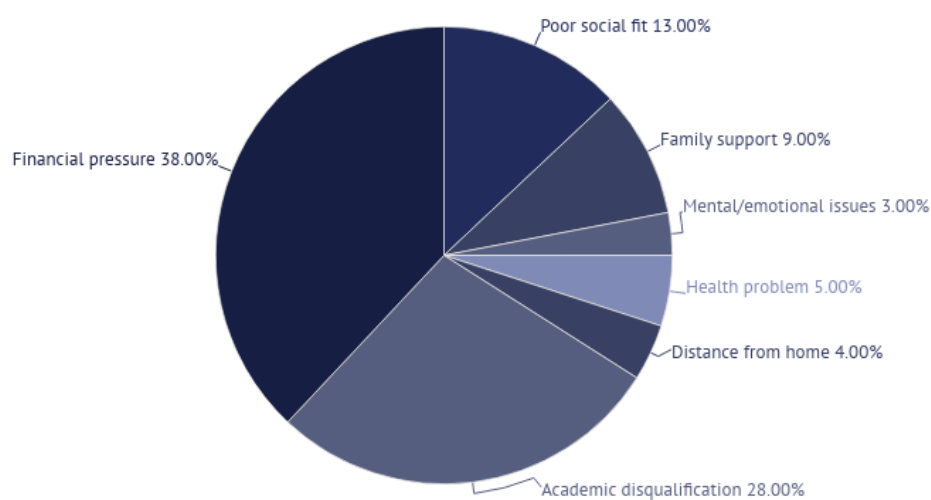→ Prospective students have **declared a gap year** to "wait COVID-19 out"

Why Do So Many Students Drop Out?

If you guessed that students primarily drop out due to academic reasons, you'd be dead wrong.

Top Reasons for Dropping out of College

Poor social fit 13.00%

Family support 9.00%

Mental/emotional issues 3.00%

Health problem 5.00%

Distance from home 4.00%

Academic disqualification 28.00%

Financial pressure 38.00%

Average amount of student loan debt per student: **$37k**

Percentage of students receiving no help from parents **60%**

Percentage of students leaving college as freshmen **28%**

Source: https://educationdata.org/college-dropout-rates/

According to the American College Health Association, **63% of students surveyed reported feeling "very lonely," 52% felt "things are hopeless," and 12% contemplated suicide**. In case you're wondering if 2020 influenced the data, the survey was done in 2017, and 31,500 students responded.

Anxiety and loneliness have long been accepted as major contributors to dropout rates. Still, most institutions focus on academic indicators when evaluating student risk and merely suggest students "connect more with students in class" when expressing loneliness.

The Gaps in Today's Retention Analysis Models

Many universities, such as Georgia State, have had dramatic results with retention programs informed by predictive insights. Predictive insights models incorporate LMS and SIS data, which do flag demographic and academic risk factors. However, these models could be much more impactful by monitoring one of the biggest dropout factors.

The big blind spot? Data generated outside of the classroom.

With a platform like Campus.app, academic institutions gain a digital campus that goes beyond traditional portals. It functions similarly to popular social media platforms, issues notifications leveraging media students prefer, and is an effective content management and delivery system.

Students and faculty can be members of interest groups, interact in classroom forums for better collaboration, and universities can create events and track attendance. Campus.app can even track keywords to find early indicators for depression, academic frustration, bullying, or discriminatory behavior.

This means universities could understand who's feeling discouraged ("I'm not college material") or lonely before students start skipping classes.

Additionally, an online community provides students an avenue to form friendships and share information. And they're communicating in a way they prefer, regardless of whether they're on campus or remote.

"But students sued schools because of remote learning," you may say. And you would be right--to a degree.

Professors scrambling to adopt a method to virtually hold a class intended as an in-person lecture format didn't have the experience to know online learning shouldn't look like in-class lecturing. One can't simply jump on Zoom and lecture as usual and expect the same results. Thought has to go into the method for presenting materials, testing logistics, and ensuring student engagement.

Student interactions must also change. Critiquing assignments without offering additional context isn't enough. They need a forum that encourages back and forth dialogue. Students also better understand verbal comments or video critique over written feedback. It's harder to misinterpret a comment supplemented with nonverbal cues.

Those rushing to declare online learning ineffective after the spring COVID-19 scramble are jumping the gun. We're better off looking at various historical online programs and assessing what does and does not work in the online learning forum.

That said, we're not arguing that in-person institutions be replaced with remote learning in the long term. Hands-on experience is an excellent way to learn, sports programs are essential, and in-person social interactions are important.

We are saying that giving students an additional way to connect - in a format they prefer - benefits everyone in the long term.

Reality Check:
Students Already Prefer to Interact Online

Generation Z is the most technology savvy generation yet. **Gen Z communicates differently than prior generations**. They like punchy headlines, short text, and multimedia formats like video. They are also very goal-oriented and want personalized attention, and they trust their peers' opinions over anything directly from the source.

Institutions have also seen a big shift in attitude. Students want to be treated as customers, and they expect ongoing customer support. They assess classes in terms of whether they think they're getting value and are highly attuned to perceived ROI. Gen Z understands tuition isn't cheap, and they've made it clear they better have an outstanding overall experience for the level of debt they often incur.

Developing a digital community to help support students interests is a must--especially in the current environment. Whether it be with financial aid, academic support, or resident Q&A, giving the community avenues for digital social connection by establishing shared interest immediately reenforces overall student success. Incorporating video chat or recorded comments or images is now essential. And using a platform that doesn't share personal information beyond a name and photo has become crucial to a privacy-conscientious generation.Incorporating video chat or recorded comments or images is essential.

Over 96% of people in the 18-29 year age range own smartphones

39% of smartphone owners reach for their phones within the first five minutes of waking up

78% of Gen Z considers their mobile devices their most important device to go online

64% of Gen Z say they are constantly connected to the internet through their mobile device

57% of Gen Z goes so far as to say that they "feel insecure" without their mobile phone

What to Look for in a Digital Campus

We look for five key features in any digital campus to help educators identify students at risk

Connect Everything

Siloed data is your biggest enemy when it comes to identifying risk. Manually merging disparate data sources can be near impossible and dramatically increase IT's overhead. Any community-based platform must integrate with the SIS and LMS (at a minimum), and it should ideally have a data transformation layer to normalize data, making real-time insights possible.

Campus.app uses its proprietary middleware layer (called Flow) to integrate information and systems to help students succeed. If we don't currently integrate with a piece of software, we can make it happen during implementation!

Make It Personal

You'll need the ability to create key personas, so students and faculty see what they care about when they need it. Prospects will need access to applications, financial aid help, or the ability to schedule a campus tour. These same events wouldn't be useful to a Senior who may want to focus on interacting with advisors and exploring masters or doctoral programs. You'll have different majors, interest groups, dining plans, and living arrangements requiring access to varying content within those personas. Personalization also allows for delegated administration.

Campus.app created a flexible interface, allowing schools to promote whatever resources and groups they desire. We also allow them to give students some choice about what's important. Students or staff can click the + button and add tools, groups, or other resources if the school permits this style of interface.

A Sense of Community

We believe the research by Lieberman, Dweck, McGonigal, and Medina that says people don't need to interact in-person to feel connected. When people do feel connected, they participate, they enroll, they learn, they are satisfied and much more.

"A connecting student is a persisting student." -- Dr. Mark Milliron, CLO at Civitas

Students find community in groups, which is easy to understand. But faculty might also find community in an interdisciplinary research group, students might find community around a guest speaker event, and staff might help create community for new students in an orientation area.

Campus.app functions like popular social media platforms, which means it's intuitive to use and easy to learn.

Communicate Where They Are

Community isn't possible without communication, and the old way of doing things just doesn't work anymore. All people, particularly students, are reading less email. A platform that spans across desktops and mobile devices allows for more opportunities for engagement. Adopting a social platform that aligns students to groups that fit with their interests in a format they already use helps adoption. There are also strategies schools can leverage to help ensure participation, such as assigning monitoring duties to resident advisors.

Campus.app organizes the user into groups based on their profile. For example, a current student using the platform will be automatically added to the All Students group as well as groups relevant to their major, campus, and/or class. We also suggest relevant groups to students based on their profile - such as clubs & societies, mentoring groups, athletics groups, student services, etc. And this is how Campus.app can help our partners significantly improve the performance of communication.

Get the Right Data

Adopting a digital campus that integrates with the tools you already use and has a data transformation layer to normalize your data means no more data silos. That means you can take behavioral data coming out of your digital campus, marry it with cognitive data coming out of your LMS, and then cap it off with demographic data coming from the SIS. The result is the most robust risk and success profile you can build.

At Campus.app, we're believers in the power of analytics. But we know that any data produced at your school is just that...yours. We don't hold your data hostage - you can move it into other systems like Tableau, Civitas, EAB, Helio, Google Analytics, etc.

A Letter From Your Students

Dear Higher Education,

After weighing the benefits of a degree against the drawbacks of the student debt I'm signing up for, I decided to get a degree. Many articles on the web advised me to do the opposite, but I also found the research stating I'll have a higher income if I finish a 4-year degree.

I've done my research, and I know what I'm doing. But I'm not sure you do.

As a Gen Zer, there are a few things you should know about me before we progress any further in this HigherEd relationship we've both committed to:

1. I will never read an email you send me. In fact, I may not even finish the subject line. I'll see the 50 character preview I get on my phone and--if you're lucky--send you a notice that I want to "UNSUBSCRIBE."

2. I prefer to communicate in short texts or video chat. It's a miracle that I sat down long enough to write a letter—just kidding (kind of).

3. I want to socialize. But I'm used to being able to continue the conversation digitally. Why don't you have an online place I can meet people interested in the same stuff I like to make this transition less painful?

4. I am paying you a lot of money for a great education AND a great overall experience. That means I'm a customer, and I'd love to be treated like one! So how about a chat support option for financial aid and other important resources I can access from my phone?

5. You know that saying, "don't judge a book by its cover"? Well, people do it all the time, and I sure did when I looked at your website. I want easy navigation, sleek design, and a little movement to make it modern. Instead, I got a crowded page with weird text all over the place.

6. When you sent me the student portal, my eyes glazed over. Who reads through 250+ links to find anything? Seriously. If I'm a new student, your system should be smart enough to surface what I care about--not faculty guidelines on physics 301 lab conduct.

7. It took me 20 minutes to find the cafeteria menu schedule online. 20 MINUTES. Not even Google could help me! Give me something where I can quickly search for what I'm looking for.

I desperately want this to work between us, but I need you to meet me half way. If I can build a website in five minutes using drop and drag design, there has to be something out there to help you make a better place for students to interact with you and each other online.

If you offer a full discount on my textbooks, I can probably help install something for you.

Sincerely,
A Frustrated Student

Students are Already Fighting for More Remote Options

In **an article in USA Today, Grace Hauk** states, "Students who have difficulty attending traditional college classes have long been calling for greater access to online courses. The pandemic has only 'heightened; the issue, said Robin Jones, director of the Great Lakes ADA Center in Chicago."

In the past, colleges have argued that they are incapable of offering online course options, but recent events have clearly changed the equation. These institutions will be required to accommodate students they have failed to accommodate in the past.

Universities can also anticipate an increase in requests for online access from students that are considered "high risk" according to **CDC guidelines**. Educators should note that the population of people who "might" be at higher risk is considerable. Asthma impacts 25 million Americans and diabetes impacts 34.2 million Americans--or 10% of the United States population.

It should be noted that students who historically chose online learning still wanted a way to collaborate and interact with classmates and instructors. These methods don't need to be face-to-face.

Over 54% of Americans prefer text or video over voice communication, and the **majority of Millenials and Gen Z** prefer texting over talking in person. While it's conceivable that these attitudes may be impacted by the degree of isolation experienced during COVID-19 stay-at-home orders, we can't know that until we enter some semblance of normality.
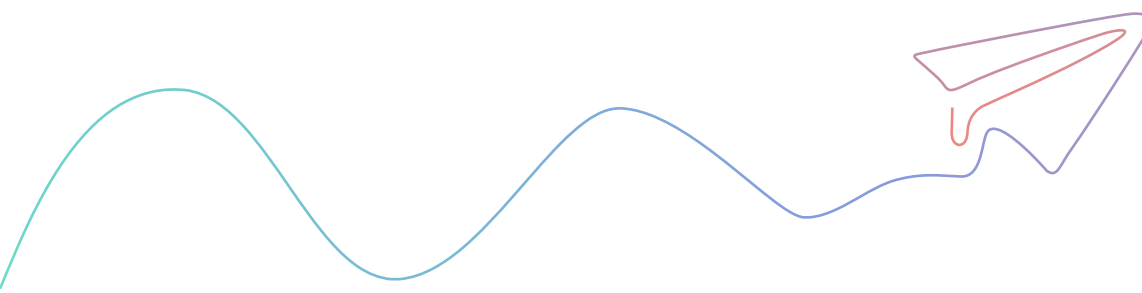
Wrapping It Up.

We understand the scramble to adopt online learning in Higher Ed to cope with COVID-19 frustrated and exhausted many. It's easy to let those feelings influence decisions about when and how to revolutionize your student's digital experience.

Given the data we outlined above, we encourage you to think beyond the global pandemic and look to trends that have been developing for years when thinking about how your institution surfaces useful, valuable, and critical resources online.

People need more ways to connect and build a sense of community.
Younger generations are accustomed to--and even prefer--online communication.

Higher Ed online communities collect critical behavioral cues for assessing risk.

In addition, technology has evolved to the point where we can elevate the right resources at the right time. This could mean educating incoming freshmen about residential policies and financial aid support or it could mean connecting a student or faculty member who is depressed with timely help.

A digital campus is not only a powerful next step for student recruiting and retention, it brings daily utility that can be life changing.

Pathify

Pathify is the most innovative student portal for higher ed. We're not just obsessed with making great technology, we're completely obsessed with student experience. Delivering cloud-based, integration friendly technology designed to drive student engagement, Pathify pushes personalized information, content and resources to the right people on any device. With a team of former university executives and technologists, we know what we're doing — and our recent incredible 84 net promoter score from customers proves it. Pathify has offices in Denver (headquarters), New York and Melbourne. pathify.com