Carpe Diem:

# IT's Part in the Age of the Digital Campus

Rising to the Occassion.

Higher education has steadily been relying more on information technology departments, and it's never been so profoundly noticeable as during COVID-19. What was historically viewed as a support position is now absolutely critical for business continuity. As schools are forced to make the shift to remote learning, their success hinges on the ability of their IT department to rise to the occasion and instructors' willingness to embrace new technology.

Universities who eschewed investing in key IT infrastructure are paying dearly now.

In today's digital world, on-demand and subscription-based services are the norm. This forced pivot to remote learning sped up an inevitable migration. IT departments will continue to play a more integral role in higher education, not only in supporting more modern infrastructure but also in supporting the demand for better student retention analytics.
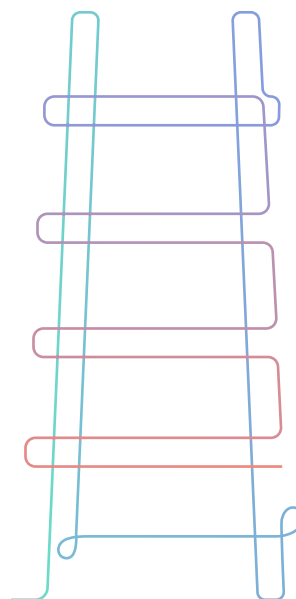
Where Are We Headed?

Educators who refused to consider the viability of remote learning are now experiencing what many already knew: Successful remote learning doesn't look the same as the traditional classroom.

Instructors can't jump on Zoom and lecture as they did in the past and expect students to feel as though they're receiving the same level of education.

Auxiliary tools must be embraced to humanize online interactions. Online communities or groups should be established to support timely question and answer sessions--ideally supported with voice or video to eliminate potential for misinterpretation. Redlining papers isn't enough. More robust feedback, including voice or video, should be employed to help students understand the basis for critique.

Students and professors would benefit from groups centered around their class, allowing students to collaborate on assignments or complicated material. Supporting material must be quickly surfaced and dynamically assigned according to student or faculty profiles. Content management is a must.

While some have protested the new learning format -- some students are going so far as to take legal action -- there are many who value remote learning. High-risk students with compromised immune systems are requesting more classes to be made available online. Students with financial constraints see online learning as a means to continue their education around a busy work schedule.
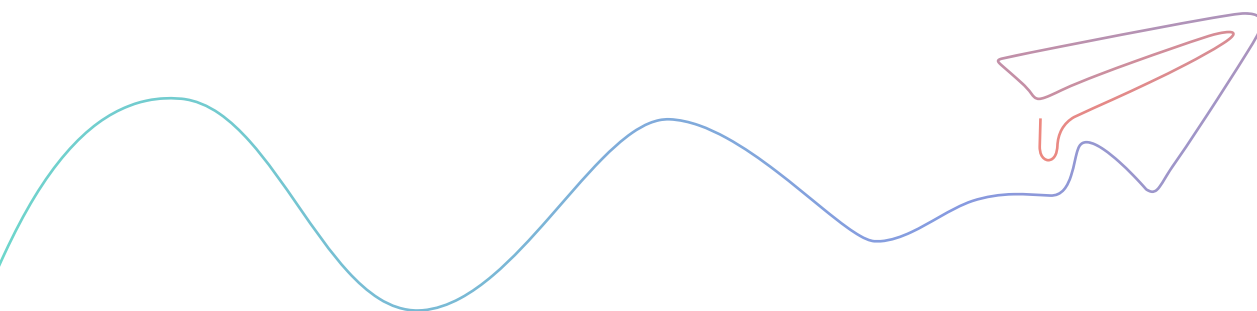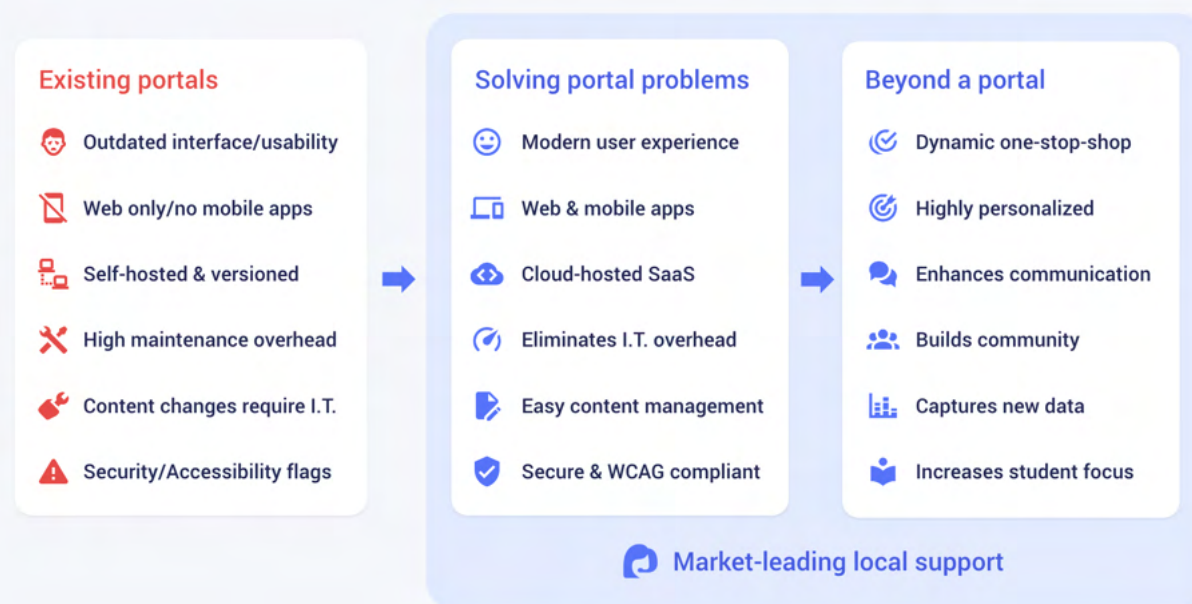
Students often drop out of school for non-academic reasons such as financial strain, a lack of social connections, and bullying. These factors aren't new, but COVID-19 has made them more prevalent as students supporting themselves through college face unemployment, and lonely students find themselves more isolated than before.

A pivot to online learning must include the adoption of robust online communities. Link farm "portals" are no longer sufficient to support students or faculty. Students are accustomed to socializing online and forming communities through shared interests. By leveraging a muscle students have already developed, campuses can increase a sense of community and decrease reports of loneliness with the right platform and online strategy.

From Portal to Digital Campus.

Existing portals	Solving portal problems	Beyond a portal
Outdated interface/usability	Modern user experience	Dynamic one-stop-shop
Web only/no mobile apps	Web & mobile apps	Highly personalized
Self-hosted & versioned	Cloud-hosted SaaS	Enhances communication
High maintenance overhead	Eliminates I.T. overhead	Builds community
Content changes require I.T.	Easy content management	Captures new data
Security/Accessibility flags	Secure & WCAG compliant	Increases student focus

Market-leading local support

For those worried about increased risk introduced with online interaction, Campus.app has keyword detection capability to catch bullying, harassment, and discriminatory behavior. It has also been used to pick up keywords flagging depression to connect students with counselors proactively. In addition, monitoring online engagement is a great way to gauge out of classroom engagement and catch early indicators for students at risk of dropping out.

We know what you're thinking. Outside of creating more work managing new tools, how does this impact IT?

If IT is prepared to analyze the additional data provided by digital tools, they can correlate tool adoption to student retention. A partial percentage point increase in retention can mean millions for a university. Demonstrating the ROI of technology is hugely beneficial to changing the view of IT as a cost center to IT as a profit center.

Suppose IT is also prepared to embrace delegated administration functionality in these tools. In that case, they free up more time to focus on surfacing insights that can help schools improve how they interact with the student body and how students perceive the school. Delegated tasks also free up more time for IT to focus on scaling their current infrastructure.

In short, IT is in a position to gain more strategic leverage if the right approach is taken.

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Meet Generation Z:
Higher Expectations.

Generation Z is the most technology savvy generation yet. They grew up using computers, can't remember a time without mobile phones, and are more fluent in social media than most of us could ever hope to be.

These digital natives are fast to jump on new technology trends, creatively leverage applications for collaboration, and are genuinely social.

But because Gen Z has always embraced the latest in technology, they expect more out of it.

They prefer video to text. They like images that tell a story over words.

Don't be fooled into thinking Gen Z won't hold higher education to the same expectations.

Before you can bridge any gaps between expectations and delivery, it always helps to take a deeper look at your audience's values.

Let's Talk Strategy.

**Increasing IT's visibility and using ROI and insights to position the
department as a profit center sounds wonderful, but how is it done?**

More Insights, Faster.

While medical researchers, particularly those focused on genomic sequencing, deal in vast amounts of data and use cutting edge analytics platforms, most academic tools are less… modern. They're also challenging to integrate.

With a platform like Campus.app, middleware enables integration with your LMS, SIS, and other vital tools through a series of clicks. With data normalization creating a consistent view of the student across systems, it's much easier to collect and analyze data points across platforms. Instead of monthly or quarterly reporting cycles that plan for time merging disparate data sources, you can focus on uncovering insights that matter.

No more data silos.

And with keyword tracking and social engagement insights, you can spot problems before they've hit critical mass.

Why Modernize?

It's tempting to build proprietary systems. However, ongoing maintenance and compatibility with new tools is a challenge. Technical debt is the biggest hurdle many IT departments face. Adopting an out-of-house platform configured to easily integrate and evolve to support future functionality removes much of the internal IT department's burden.

Adopting online communities also sends the message higher education is receptive to meeting students where they prefer to be, an attractive selling point for enrollment and retention. We recently informally polled ten high school seniors about topics related to technology on campus, and 8 out of 10 stated a school's digital infrastructure could make or break their interest in attending. This presents IT with enormous opportunity to drive ROI through modernization.

Scaling.

Every department wants something different. Every professor has content specific to their class. As remote learning is accepted because of necessity or natural evolution, these needs will make IT jobs even more difficult unless platforms help mitigate the burden of customization.

Delegated administration has historically been frowned upon, but the granular permissions available in most tools makes it a feature IT departments can't afford to overlook. Teachers' assistants may be able to function as a class group admin and post key assignments and trigger alerts. Department administrators may be responsible for maintaining groups for classes.

A cloud-based system that reliably delivers notifications and alerts to the correct audiences is also a huge win for business continuity. Whether your school is in a hurricane path or dealing with COVID-19 restrictions, quick and reliable communication is key.
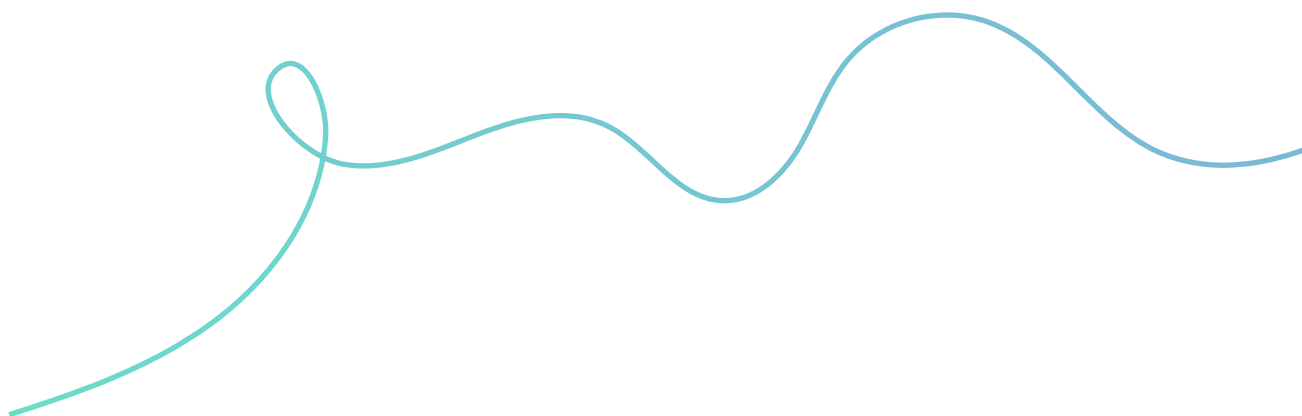
The Big Stakes:
Early Student Warning Systems.

According to statistics compiled by Education.org, the college dropout rate across two- and four-year institutions is a staggering 40%. Of those who dropped out, only 28% of students dropped out for academic reasons.

A jaw-dropping 72% of college drop outs left for non-academic reasons.

It's not surprising that 38% left due to financial strain (a number that's likely to increase with the current U.S. unemployment rates). However, many people express surprise when they learn that 13% drop out due to a poor social fit. Students either feel they "aren't college material," grow intolerably lonely, or are victims of bullying.

Many universities have developed predictive analytics to flag at-risk students before they officially drop out. These platforms look across LMS and SIS data with student demographic information to determine whether a student is at risk.

But there's a problem with these models.

They only incorporate in class data.

With a platform like Campus.app, you have access to university event attendance data, online engagement stats, and keyword tracking that can track everything from academic frustration to cyberbullying. It adds a new and important layer of non-academic student behavioral data to factor into retention models.

There are also useful applications for counselors wishing to proactively reach out to students displaying symptoms of anxiety and depression.

Digital campuses can reach beyond academic affairs and improve a stronger sense of community.

Pillars for a Digital Campus.

Not every platform is created equal. We look for five key tenants in any platform to ensure student, faculty, and IT adoption.

1 | Integrations

Don't let tools that your organization leverages, and may even be satisfied with, lead to siloed behavior. At the same time, ensure those tools and resources are easily seen by the right person at the right time. This means surfacing notifications and communication about those resources in a way that's easily noticed.

Pathify uses API integration to help your students see and use the information and systems to help them succeed. If we don't currently integrate with a piece of software, we can make it happen during implementation!

2 | Personalization

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 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. Graduate students and professors can manage their own course material uploads and notifications to students.

Pathify 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.

3 | 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.

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

4 | Communication

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.

Pathify 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.

5 | 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 Pathify, 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.

What's Next?

While none of us can predict the future (who saw 2020 coming???), we have some suspicions about where we're headed next. And to be clear -- we're excited.

The more higher education moves online, the more data we have to consider when solving acquisition and retention problems. Recent developments in unsupervised artificial intelligence are fascinating. The potential to bring unstructured data into the mix and surface patterns we couldn't dream of finding in the past means a brighter future for several verticals, including higher education.

The next question we expect will be answered, "What's missing in the remote learning era?"

While we understand universities would prefer to hold in-person classes, the reality going forward is schools will need to embrace HyFlex options to ensure student safety and success. Many universities have made headlines after they've been forced to close their campus following COVID-19 resurgences. The reality is, no one knows whether we'll be dealing with COVID-19 over the next months or even year(s).

Because online learning is likely to be with us for the foreseeable future, we see educators struggling with striking a balance between offering personalized support and protecting everyone's privacy. Platform-based Q&A sessions with audio and video technology may offer a promising solution to this age-old problem. Online socialization will also need to play a larger role for all of us to feel more connected.

At least for now.

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