

# Pathify

MAGAZINE

## THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE ISSUE

### *Fall 2021*



*Keeping up with*  
**THE STUDENT  
EXPERIENCE &  
EXPECTATIONS**

*Serving*  
**DIVERSE STUDENT  
COMMUNITY IN & OUT  
OF THE CLASSROOM**

*Enabling*  
**STUDENTS TO  
SUCCEED  
IN HIGHER ED**



# Pathify **MAGAZINE**

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Letter from the  
EDITOR

# About the Student Experience Issue

If we all had a dollar for every time we've heard the phrase "the new normal," we'd all be millionaires. Unfortunately, in the slow waning days of a global pandemic it's a topic no one can get away from. But the truth of the matter is, things have been far from "normal" in higher ed for a while now.

The price of a higher education is skyrocketing and the burden of student loan debt is no longer a quiet, unspoken truth. Students know what they're getting into before they commit to college and are letting that influence many of their higher ed decisions.

At the same time, the entire consumer world has shifted dramatically in the past decade and a half. The internet we used to access while sitting at a desk is now with us constantly. Instant access to on-demand information has



become more than second nature, it's become a given in everyday life. And that's the world rising college students have spent nearly their entire lives in. They don't need to adapt to college, higher ed institutions need to adapt to them (within reason). Things simply aren't going to go back to the way they were, and quite frankly that has little to do with the pandemic.

In this inaugural issue of Pathify Magazine, we dive deep into the world of student expectations and experience. Students are at the heart of higher education, and what they want has shifted over the years. From how to better support students, to fostering feelings of engagement and connection, to treating students like consumers, this issue is all about how to meet modern student demands. We hope you enjoy the conversation.

*Jamie Saine*  
Editor



Letter from the CEO

# Welcome to Pathify Magazine

Let's start by focusing on student success



**T**hanks for taking the time to read the exciting inaugural issue of Pathify Magazine. We launched this magazine as a platform to elevate the higher education conversation and bring in some important voices — industry experts, your peers and, most importantly, students.

Why did we choose student experience as the central topic for our first issue? Because at the end of the day, that's what matters most. We make no qualms about the fact that we're absolutely obsessed with the student experience. Higher education institutions are committed to creating a stellar student experience, and the vendors they work with should support them and partner with them in that commitment.

Student experience needs to be at the core of everything an institution does and the decisions they make, and that's the philosophy we apply to our own organization. Pathify exists to simplify and enrich the student experience through technology. Though we're a tech company, we're not here to ship software, we're here to provide an experience that truly makes life easier for students.

Creating a student experience that genuinely aligns with student needs requires work. Really, really hard work. It takes humility, a willingness to listen, accountability and a commitment to excellence each and every day. It's a noble and exciting challenge. That's why we felt it was the perfect topic to set the tone for this brand new print endeavor.

Going forward, we'll explore new topics each Spring and Fall semester to help shine some light on the most pressing higher ed issues and challenges of the day. We hope these articles will give you insight and inspiration for years to come.

*Chase Williams*

CEO





## Letter from a STUDENT

# Student Thoughts

No one better understands the student experience and what really matters than a student themselves. Listening to what students want is a vital part of providing a good experience and meeting their expectations. Some expectations are big, but some are as fundamental and elegant as making friends and fitting in.

In this issue's *Student Thoughts* letter, Erin D. shares how her expectations and needs changed throughout her collegiate experience.







## Dear Higher Ed Leadership,

**A**s you enter your college years, it is understandable that several factors are being considered. In fact, it might be hard to pinpoint exactly what the most important thing on your mind is because of the many different aspects that go into your experience. Selecting a college is a two-way street; the student needs to meet the requirements for admission, but the university also needs to provide the opportunities that the student desires. These “wants and needs” are specific to each student and will ultimately determine their final decision.

For me, I felt like I entered my freshman and sophomore year with less expectations than a typical student may have. At the end of the day, my two main focuses were adjusting to the rigor of college level courses and making new friends in an environment I wasn't used to. If my university would be able to provide opportunities for me to be able to do those two things, I would be happy. Luckily for me, my university allowed me to excel in both of those areas. I joined a sorority and several other organizations where I made amazing friends, and if I needed help in any of my classes it was readily available to me through tutors, group study sessions, etc. I finished the year extremely pleased with how everything unfolded and was already excited to go back to school in the fall.

However, now as I begin my junior year, I recognize how important it is to shift my focus towards life after college and turn to rely more on how my university can help me

succeed. In other words, after all of the effort I have put into achieving my academic goals the past couple of years, it is time that I look to my university to provide me with resources to transition into the next chapter of my life following graduation. Ultimately, the whole point of obtaining a higher education is to be more prepared when it comes time to enter the workforce, so it is only expected that the college you attend should provide the tools for you to do so.

Fortunately, my university has gone above and beyond in their efforts to offer top notch resources dedicated to career preparation. In fact, according to Princeton Review, it is ranked number one in the Best Career Services category, so I feel extremely lucky to have access to all that is offered to me on campus. Whether it be through on-campus internships, seminars with business professionals, career fairs and much more, I feel confident that if I continue to work hard on my end, my school will guide me in using my strengths to find opportunities available outside of the classroom.

In conclusion, I am nothing but grateful that I am able to attend a school that exceeds my expectations in what it has to offer. So much so, that as I reflect, I would only hope that students across the country would have access to the resources that I do.

Sincerely,

*Erin D.*

Class of 2023





# Keeping Up with the Student Experience & Expectations

**How changing expectations are shaping the student experience and influencing the value of higher education (and how you can keep up)**

**S**tudents may be returning to higher ed campuses, but their expectations aren't resetting. After a tumultuous 18 months, they're placing even more emphasis on student experience and keeping a careful eye on the value of their education. To combat dropping enrolling numbers and a looming enrollment cliff, standout higher ed institutions are paying special attention to shifting expectations and providing a more well-rounded student experience.

"Higher ed was already changing before the pandemic. There's a lot of competition out there," said Dr. Gerald Jones, Associate Vice President for Student Affairs at Tallahassee Community College. "We're in a very competitive market. How do we meet the needs of our students during these critical times?"



## STUDENT CONSUMERS & THE DEMAND FOR EDUCATIONAL ROI

Those in higher education have noticed evolving student expectations for several years. From how classes are conducted, to what support services are offered, to the tech solutions and communication channels in place, the consumer-minded nature of incoming students is leading them to expect more from their higher ed experience. To meet these evolving demands, institutions need to consider that students see themselves as consumers and keep that perspective in mind when strategizing student experience goals, according to Dr. Jason Ruckert, Vice President of Enrollment Management and Marketing at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University.

“Even if this is something we might not want to hear, if you were to see a group of students on campus and ask them if they see themselves as a consumer of the



university, I believe their answer probably would be yes,” said Dr. Ruckert. “Students have come to expect a high level of service in return for their investment. They’re used to brands forming and maintaining relationships with them, and they view colleges and universities similarly. In a really fiercely competitive global market for higher education, we as educational providers need to ensure that student experience is a top priority.”

As students take a more consumer-minded approach to higher education, they’re often focusing on the return on investment (ROI) offered by their educational experience. This increasing emphasis on educational ROI is likely tied to the drastically increasing price tag for a higher education coupled with a fluctuating job market. With students acutely aware of the burden of student loan debt and spooked by several economic recessions during their childhoods, they’re

now carefully weighing the cost of higher education. “Going to college” is no longer the assumed next step for many students as they evaluate the value behind that decision.

“Student expectations are evolving around a lot of things like affordability and return on investment,” said Dr. Ruckert. “We’re hearing a lot more of that in higher education than we did in the past decades. People are hyper focused on the value proposition that an institution provides. What will their return on investment be after graduation?”

This means having solid job prospects and the skills to be successful post-graduation. To align with those expectations, higher ed institutions need to pay close attention to the programs they offer, according to Dr. Jones. Courses, degrees and certifications need to focus on enabling student economic mobility post-graduation, he noted.





## THE IMPORTANCE OF A HOLISTIC COLLEGE EXPERIENCE

While job prospects and earning potential are a top priority for most students, they want more from the college experience overall to make it worth their time and investment. For today's students, educational ROI also means having an enriching and supportive experience while taking courses. For the money they're paying, they expect more than just classes and a degree. They want to feel like they're valued by the institution and have access to support services to help them transition into the next phases of their lives. If these services aren't available or prioritized, students may second guess spending the money on a degree.

"Previously, higher education was very focused on a student's academic success and getting them from course to course. Now it's all about making sure the student is supported 360 degrees," said Dr. Matthew

Gregory, Assistant Vice President of Student Affairs at Labouré College. "That has made it more enticing for a student to go to college, more enticing for them to earn a degree."

**"We're in an era of Amazon Prime, Grubhub and online grocery orders and deliveries. Students expect their interactions across campus to be seamless, not cumbersome."**

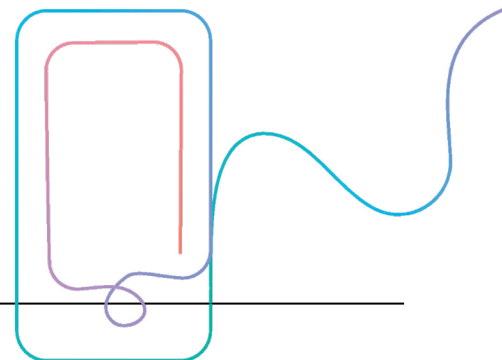
— Dr. Jason Ruckert  
Vice President of Enrollment Management, Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University

Dr. Gregory notes that "everything that impacts a student outside of a classroom impacts their ability to be successful in the classroom." Higher ed institutions now have to take a more comprehensive approach to student support. On the academic front, this means making courses and academic help more readily available, something that shifted and evolved during the pandemic. Even with the return to campus, hybrid learning modalities are emerging as a lasting model at many higher ed institutions. Students have shown a reluctance to let go of lecture recordings, virtual office hours and on-demand help, even as many of them are eager to return to in-person learning. In many instances, the technology solutions put in place to handle a forced remote learning situation better align with the "on-demand, anytime" life students are used to leading.

For Labouré College, this includes solutions like an online tutoring platform where students can ask questions off hours and receive an answer within minutes, rather than waiting for official tutors to be available during business hours. Labouré also moved advising sessions online, allowing students to drop into virtual office hours instead of attending an on-campus advising appointment.

"Creating things that can be accessed at the time that's convenient to students, that has been very beneficial to them," said Dr. Gregory.

Non-academic student support services are also increasingly important. The pandemic took a noticeable toll on the mental and social well being of many people. Higher ed institutions can't ignore these challenges









and need to find creative ways to address them. This can look like anything from a mental health counseling mobile app to an on-campus food pantry to address food insecurity, according to Dr. Jones.

“At TCC we just launched a model we call CARE, which is a comprehensive student services model,” Dr. Jones explained. “CARE stands for Connections, Academics, Resources and Engagement. Through those four angels we aim at providing students an exceptional student experience to meet their needs as they study and graduate. Within that particular model we offer out-of-the-classroom support both academic and non-academic.”

### MAKING SUPPORT MATTER

Offering support services is important, but it does little good if students don’t participate. That’s why many schools are taking steps to actively put resources in front of students.

“In the past, you had to go seek out services,” Dr. Gregory said. “Now we follow an intrusive advising model. We want to give students those services in advance, whether they like them or not, because we know that they may actually need them at some point. I much prefer this model because it allows us to have conversations that students never realized they needed to have in the first place.”

It all comes down to making the higher education experience match the consumer-world experience, Dr. Ruckert explained.



“We’re in an era of Amazon Prime, Grubhub and online grocery orders and deliveries,” he said. “Students expect their interactions across campus to be seamless, not cumbersome. They don’t expect to run across the entire campus just to get simple tasks completed. When they want assistance, they certainly want it quicker than maybe we’ve been able to provide in the past. That’s where chatbots and a lot of the technology out there can be an advantage for institutions.”

Higher ed institutions had been using technology to help students connect long before the pandemic, but over the past year ed tech solutions became even more important. In many cases, it became a lifeline to keep college communities

together. For many institutions, including TCC and Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, that has taken the form of an app that allows students and faculty to connect and engage online. These apps are vital to connecting different student groups — such as remote students, adult learners and student populations spread across different campuses. Giving students from different walks of life the ability to engage creates a sense of belonging and community, something that’s increasingly important to overall student success and wellbeing.

“We have an app called MyTTC, which is the gateway for student connections and engagement on our campus,” Dr. Jones said. “Faculty is there, staff is there, students even have the opportunity to meet new friends







via the app through the various groups, such as our first year experience program, which is designed to offer high impact programs to build a sense of belonging to all new students at TCC.”

“At our own institution we created a virtual community for adult learners to join clubs and be part of the SGA and things like that so that they could feel just as connected as the residential students,” said Dr. Ruckert. “We also have a lot of our faculty that are engaging in the virtual community as a way to connect with students outside of the classroom, which I think is critically important.”

### **YOUR MAGIC WAND: STUDENT INPUT**

The key to keeping up with student expectations and creating a worthwhile experience is listening to students, all three experts agreed. Expectations change so quickly that new programs one year may not be the right fit next year. Schools that value student experience understand the need to be flexible and adjust quickly.

“Creating a positive experience for your students is a moving target, it’s not a stationary one,” said Dr. Ruckert. “The things we’re doing right now to enhance the students’ experience is a great starting point, but I think it’s one that we should



constantly look to evolve and continue to get better at.”

Tools like student surveys, listening sessions, focus groups and feedback portals give students the opportunity to influence their experience. For institutions, these tools are an invaluable way to stay connected with the student body and ensure services and initiatives align with real student wants and needs.

“We’re always evolving. It’s so important as we grow that we value the students’ input. That we value the students’ voice and that we be on the cutting edge of innovation and change in higher education,” said Dr. Jones. “What we may offer students today via their input may not be the same as what we value and offer them tomorrow because systems change, seasons change and we just want to be on the cutting edge of change.”

While shifting student expectations may be challenging for higher ed institutions to keep up with, schools don’t have a choice. At the end of the day, they wouldn’t exist without students. Keeping the student experience, expectations and needs at the heart of planning and decision making will help higher ed remain attractive as students expect more from their experience.

“We should be reminded that we are here because of the students,” Dr. Jones said. “My motto is ‘Always Students, Always First.’ In everything we do, if we remember that then you can’t go wrong because it should always be about the student experience.”





# Serving a Diverse Student Community In & Out of the Classroom

Rick Shaw is the Chief Information Systems Officer at Antelope Valley College, which serves 18,000 students annually in Southern California. Engaging with a wide variety of learners required a nuanced approach to student support before the pandemic. Since COVID-19, Shaw's team has had to get creative to ensure the continued success of AVC students. In this interview he shares his thoughts on student needs and how best to serve a diverse community, during and after the pandemic.



**C**onnected campuses are more important than ever. How do you facilitate connectivity with such a varied student population?

A connected campus looks like a lot of things for us. It's the student who has to have access to the workstation in the open lab. It's the working student who's doing two jobs and picking up one class because they're trying to work their way into something better. It's the returning student who has had a career and who is not necessarily technology savvy but needs to retool and pick up some of those computer skills to

be successful. It's all of those and so much more. My job is to partner with my peers in academic affairs, my deans, my faculty and identify those tools they need to enhance the student's involvement.

As we start coming out of these times of COVID we're in the process of revamping all of our classrooms. We had a smart classroom configuration that had a projector/workstation but lacked the camera for the hybrid modality. The concept is to support half in or a portion in and the rest online, either for convenience or illness or whatever. We're refitting our 250+ classrooms to meet that modality.







**With students decentralized because of COVID-19 shutdowns, how do you keep everyone connected and informed?**

We go through cycles of policy conversations about communication styles and structures to students. We've gone to the point of over communicating through email because we don't want somebody to miss something because we're scattered to the wind because of COVID. Now we're having the internal conversations of, "What does that communications policy look like now that we're trying to reign it back into campus?"

**Since AVC is a community-serving college, it has different needs and priorities than larger four year institutions. How are the priorities of a community college different from other institutions?**

The average age of our student is 29 or above. We have a sizable population of continuing learners, we have a sizable population of returning students. We have a very active career tech ed program.

We are a community serving institution, so we have to be aware of the needs of our community. It's a tremendously large geographic area and as such a tremendously large needs environment. And trying to make sure that this institution serves those communities' needs is what we do.

Four year colleges tend to focus in a much broader context than community colleges.

**Many institutions that serve diverse populations face challenges around campus and technology access. The pandemic exacerbated that situation and things aren't likely to return to normal anytime soon, if ever. What are the needs of your students and how did those needs shift during the pandemic?**

I'm acutely aware of the digital divide. We are very much a commuter college and we serve a huge geographic range across two counties. We have a huge retiree community from the military and aerospace but we also have a huge







community of first time learners, first generation college attendees and with the times of COVID it amplified this digital divide. Students were deeply dependent on our open resources on campus to do their studies, to access their research, to write their papers, to attend their classes. Without those on-campus facilities, they were stuck. Their ability to do their class through a smartphone doesn't fulfill their needs, if they have a smartphone. Not all of our students even have a smartphone.

We very quickly did a needs analysis of our student population and started a computer loan program. We bought a boatload of Chromebooks, scavenged workstations and laptops out of labs that were due for refresh and queued up a loan program and started reaching out to students and saying, "You need this to do your work, here you go." To date, we've loaned out over 800 computers and almost 400 hotspots. It's helped bridge that gap. It's certainly

not perfect but it has filled a portion of that need.

**While access to technology isn't always equal, when smartly implemented it can help more people access higher ed resources. How do you see tech solutions fitting the needs of AVC students?**

I see opportunities with higher ed solutions that have good structure and layout, but also that have a social media-flavor to how it behaves and community components. Everything also needs to be fully accessible by an app. That's important to our niche. We need to be able to reach our students on mobile and provide access to tools on mobile so that they can do what they need to do at 3am, because they don't operate from 8am to 8pm when our helpdesk is open.

**At the end of the day, student success is the main goal of everything a higher ed institution does. But being in the weeds everyday, it's easy to drift away from that agenda. How can IT stay student-focused?**

I function from the philosophy that IT is an enabler. We're a partner and an enabler and we're about making stuff work and problem solving. My job is to listen to the dialog and identify the pain points and provide a solution.

When I started here in 2013, the average age of a workstation on campus was 9.5 years. The oldest still in operation was 14 years old. It's now four years and we're in a four year refresh cycle. It enables our faculty and students to be successful.

**Things are clearly different now and many institutions feel life will never return completely to the way it was before COVID-19. That combined with shifting student demographics and expectations, how are you adjusting to new student needs?**

All of our labs are enabled for remote access through a virtualization hypervisor. We're trying to present as seamless an interface to what they're expecting in their instructional environment. We've loaned out a ton of equipment through the computer loan program that we set up. And we said, "If you're going to enroll in the next term, keep it over the break." For the most part it's been a very successful adjustment. We're dealing now with the swing back in the



**We need to be able to reach our students on mobile and provide access to tools on mobile so that they can do what they need to do at 3am, because they don't operate from 8am to 8pm when our helpdesk is open.**



other direction and trying to repopulate the campus. We're transitioning into a hybrid or hyperflex modality.

I don't think things will ever return to fully what they were. COVID has thrust IT into a very public role. We've worked very hard at making IT the enabler and the partner. That hard work has paid off over the last year. We did a global solution for the classroom and now we're looking at the individual applications and saying, "That global solution doesn't fit this need. How do we adapt to it?"

A perfect example is our ASL community on campus — American Sign Language and our deaf community. Their instructional modality in the classroom is in a circle. They sit in the classroom in a circle and sign back and forth to each other as a way of immersion learning. A camera on the wall and a lecturer at the front of the room doesn't

fit that modality that they're accustomed to. How do I fix that? I don't know yet. But we're having those conversations.

**You've spoken a lot about hybrid on-campus/remote learning, and you're certainly not alone. From your perspective, what does the future look like for teaching and learning?**

We've architected the classroom to maintain the capacity for a distance learning component. We want to enable the faculty to support the student who is a working professional or a working parent who because of child care issues can't make class today or can't make this class except for online. So the faculty has the option to do both the in person and the distance education remote instruction. I think that modality is here to stay.

We really want to get back to an in person instruction modality. I firmly believe in

network learning and peer instruction and peer knowledge sharing in the classroom. You see that with learning communities and you see that with working groups in classrooms. Those modalities in some ways are served by technology solutions. We're in the process of implementing a chatbot solution that has an AI backend because students have questions at 3am and no one's answering the help desk at 3am. It's about being able to provide solutions at the times that fit students' needs. We recognize we need that level of service.



# Enabling Students to Succeed in Higher Ed

**Dr. Kim Poast is the Chief Student Success & Academic Affairs Officer at Colorado Department of Higher Education (CDHE). She also spent five years at Community College of Denver, serving as Dean of Students and Executive Director of Institutional Advancement.**

**Throughout her career, Dr. Poast has focused on how to help all students achieve and succeed in higher education. Though we've come a long way, we still have a long way to go. In this interview she shares things she sees working and areas where the culture of higher ed still needs to catch up to truly support student success.**



**M**ost people understand the transition from 6th to 7th grade or from 9th to 10th grade. But the transition from 12th to "13th grade" is so overly complex. It shouldn't be. How can higher ed help ease that transition?

My former boss Dr. Kim Hunter-Reed used to say all the time, "You cannot be what you cannot see." Sometimes the key to accessing higher education is the ability to see yourself there and have access to that information.

I was a first generation kid from a low income family and I had to navigate going from high school, where I knew all the



systems and processes because I had grown up there, into a completely different world. I'll never forget my first day on campus wandering around, I was approached by our campus pastor at the time. He came up to me and he said, "You look lost." And I said, "I am. I don't know where I'm going in terms of buildings, but I also don't know where I'm going in terms of how to do this."

I think there's a lot we can do and a lot we have done over the last several years in terms of easing that transition from K-12 into higher education. Some of that is getting kids access to early rigorous coursework while they're still in high school. Some of it is looking at internships and apprenticeships while you're still in high school and work-based learning experiences that can give you work-based learning opportunities that are different. Some of it is the intentional advising and partnering with higher ed institutions to make sure there's a seamless transition between K-12 and higher ed. And some of it is frankly just getting kids on to a campus so that they can see themselves in that space. There's a lot we can do.

Higher education is not a widget maker, it's a human profession. It's a place where you have to be able to connect with a human being in order to really be successful and make the most of what that journey looks like for you.



**You laid out some examples, like rigorous coursework and work-based learning. But when it comes to actually starting that first year of college, how can high ed institutions make students feel comfortable and help them find their place?**

A great example is Community College of Denver. It's on a campus that is shared between a community college, a four year institution and a graduate institution. So a student could start anywhere in their journey and navigate through whatever made sense to them. Oftentimes, you had students who wandered into the building not really sure of what they wanted to do

and found a place at Community College of Denver because of the relationships that they could develop with people and the intentional advising and the navigation of services.

Often what's required is case management — individual attention to students and student needs and getting them the resources they need. That's growing at all institutions, but I think community colleges have always done it best. They were the first to recognize the challenge of first generation students and to understand what it meant in terms of the way those students navigate college.

**Like you said, it's important to remember that higher ed institutions are teaching people, not brains. People need to be at the core of everything. Does higher education keep that concept at heart or are there ways it's too hung up on just the brain and not the whole person?**

We've been having an on-going discussion about the requirements that it takes for students to get into higher education. In Colorado, the current law is that you have to take the standardized assessment. Whatever you think about standardized assessments, I know that from a student perspective some students will opt out of doing that or never submit a score because they don't think it's good enough to get into a higher ed institution. But if







you look at all the other factors that are associated with humans — grade point average, student curriculars, other social emotional factors — you'll see that these students can be and are successful in getting to the next phase. We've seen this in California's success in eliminating the standardized test requirement.

The other thing we do a lot in the culture of higher education is we place students at the lowest common denominator wherever they are. So we place them in developmental education even though we know that hinders a student from getting to the next sequence of courses. We set an SAT or ACT requirement to assess them into a class when sometimes if you have the grit and emotional intelligence and background knowledge you can be and are as successful.

**Higher ed is steeped in processes and traditions, and isn't necessarily known for updating quickly. Sometimes the "connectedness" component gets left out. What's being connected mean to today's students?**

In higher ed we clearly need to be connected as humans to other people. But I think connectedness also extends to being

connected to the systems and structures in your institution. They play a role in the way in which you're able to or not able to navigate your higher ed journey.

When I started at Community College of Denver, the process and procedures were so difficult. One of the practices we had were pre-printed book loan checks for students. It was good in theory, because it helped students get an advance on their financial aid so they could go to the bookstore and purchase books. But the process of getting students to claim their checks (by standing in a physical line), to understand what it was for, and then to figure out how to get across campus to stand in another big long line to get their books — the process wasn't student friendly. Students need assistance to better access resources like that. It shouldn't be a difficult and confusing process.

For me, connected is ensuring that whatever the student's experience is — whether it's a technology platform, whether it's a human being, whether it's a book or resource, whether it's students in a classroom — that they have those resources and they have the agency to access them.

**The book loan checks bring up another good point: the affordability of higher education. It's no secret that students are weighing the cost of higher ed against the benefits more closely than they have for decades. It's not an easy problem to solve. How can affordability be realistically addressed?**

We in the Colorado Department of Higher Ed are really leaning into open educational resources. We believe strongly that students who have access to free and accessible materials are more likely to be able to engage with the content. Just being able to have that content in general is important, rather than sacrificing the book because they need the money for rent or food. We're really leaning into helping institutions build out open education content and open access content for their students, and that's been going great.



**We believe strongly that students who have access to free and accessible materials are more likely to be able to engage with the content.**

**You are very student-centered. When dealing with people who aren't always as student-focused (maybe they're more data-focused) how do you get your point across?**

For me, it's being able to approach a legislator or the commissioner or someone from a non-profit with an understanding of their perspective and acknowledge that, but trying to tell a different story than the one they're accustomed to. It's about talking with facts and data to tell



the real story: How a student gets from point A all the way through point B and onto their program.

Oftentimes I'll tell stories of the students I've worked with and what their experience was. My dissertation was a compilation of student stories from first generation working class women in higher education. The stories I told were about how inaccessible higher education was, or how they stumbled into a person who made a difference, or how they wandered in from the projects down the street looking for a four year institution and ran into a community college. Stories about how their classes were evaluated and how their learning was evaluated and where they are now. I always try to bring it back to what the research says but also that human connection, something you can relate to.

**There are so many ways a student might find their own unique path to higher education. As you mentioned, there are many students who take a more unconventional course. How can higher ed better support these students who may have a lot of life experience before ever stepping foot into a higher ed classroom?**

The biggest thing is that these students know these competencies and let's acknowledge the learning that happened. One of the things that I say is that all learning counts, wherever it comes from.

The multiple ways we can count the different kinds of learning that take place is important. Work-based experience for college credit, military experience for college credit, etc. For me it's about the students being able to see their path and how to get there without roadblocks along the way.

The Trump administration actually spent a lot of time thinking about apprenticeships and work-based learning experiences and for that I'm really grateful. Those gave us the opportunity to really think differently about how we were providing instruction to students, particularly in the healthcare and IT spaces. We now have a statewide

apprenticeship program for college students where they're able to get work experience and also move on their journey to their Associates and Bachelors degrees.

**Recognizing these life factors, not just traditional learning, is so important. The learning triangle has cognition at the top, but it has two other corners that have largely been ignored: Affection and conation (what people call mindset, grit, resilience, tenacity). We know that far more people leave higher ed for reasons in the bottom two corners. Yet, we have mostly focused on measuring and working on cognition. We give tests that are proxies for cognition, we give grades which are proxies for cognition. But we know that someone who doesn't feel connected or supported or loved or respected when they walk into the class can't learn. We know that people who don't believe they can get through on the conative side, they probably can't. What are you doing to affect the other two corners?**

What I think about immediately is we have two programs that operate out of the Department of Higher Ed. One is our "Colorado GEAR UP" program that is a statewide program that works with middle and high school students on ensuring they have the right support services — access to funds, tutoring, etc. We deploy counselors

throughout the state to work with high school students to help them in what their journey looks like.

The other program we run is the "Colorado Opportunity Scholarship Initiative." Part of that is a scholarship program, so the dollars to be able to help afford college. But the other part is dollars sent to institutions to help hire advisors and people on the ground to help students navigate using a model that we know is successful. It incorporates not just learning about the direct pieces of accessing higher education, but ensuring the students are connected and have the right wrap-around support services necessary for them to get through.

I feel really lucky that the programs I get to work with have a focus on ensuring there are dollars matched to the right kinds of student supports that are important to help students be successful. Not every Department of Higher Education has that, some departments literally just do degree authorizations and those sorts of things.

I'm also lucky to have both a Senior Director of Academic Affairs and Innovation and a Senior Director of Student Affairs and Academic Pathways. Their job is to focus on that whole experience, not just a single part of it.





# Connecting Students in a Modern World

**Bret Ingerman is the Vice President for Information Technology at Tallahassee Community College. Bret has built his career on the foundational belief that IT should be an enabling entity that helps people solve problems. We talked to Bret about how higher ed institutions can solve the problem of student connectedness and access, now and beyond the pandemic.**

**H**elping students feel a sense of belonging and connectedness is important to overall student success, and it's something we've heard students talk about more lately. They want to make those connections to peers, to professors, to a college culture and feel like they're meant to be there. How has that need for connectedness and higher ed's ability to meet that need changed over the years?

When I went to college I felt disconnected. I went to school in the age of large universities and feeling like you're just a number. Certainly it was more physically connected because technology wasn't present — I remember registering with punch cards. I was connected to certain people there but at a large university back in the '80s you sort of felt like a number.

It was hard to be connected, except for your small cohort of friends, social life, fraternity,

whatever you were a part of and key faculty. But even there, key faculty didn't start to materialize in your life typically until you were an upper class student because in the lower levels you're in a biology class with 500 students in a lecture, so it's hard to feel connected.

I think what I've learned is no matter how big you are, no matter how many students you're dealing with — and at TCC we're dealing with tens of thousands of students — you're not too big to try to find ways to connect students to each other, connect students to the campus, connect students to the data, connect decision making to the data. My college experience wasn't a bad experience, but it did show me that there are better ways to engage with people and that technology offers in some ways the ability to do that, to reach out in ways we couldn't before.

**Technology has definitely made it easier for students to connect, especially if they're not on a residential campus. That became**







**especially important when everything went remote because of COVID-19. What does today's connected student look like and how can institutions facilitate those connections?**

It would be trite and too simplistic to say that the connected student is a student who has devices that connect to things. I think we're well beyond that. To me, when I hear "connected," in my head I hear "engaged." When you talk about a connected student or connected campus, what I think about is students being connected to their campus, being connected to their education, being connected to each other. With technology,

I think about systems connected to each other and using that information to reach out and connect with students.

To me it's about the relationship between and among the people at our institution, the systems at our institution, the data at our institution. That's the first thing that occurs, how do we connect people to people, people to systems, systems to systems, data to each other, how are we making all those connections between and among people and systems.

**I imagine those technologies and connections played an bigger role than you could have ever imagined when the pandemic hit. How did you keep a sense of connectedness and engagement with students when they couldn't come to campus? Did you see more students engaging**

**with the systems you did have in place now that they couldn't rely on in-person interactions?**

Through strategic purchases of systems that are connected and integrated with each other, we were able to keep a sense of community and engagement. Our student portal, MyTCC, gave us a way for students to virtually engage with each other and virtually engage with offices on campus to ask questions. We were fortunate that we stood it up the Fall before to get people interested. We had seen good growth and good use, but now we have 13,000 people regularly using the MyTCC portal without much advertising because they know it's a place where they can go to engage with other students and help each other out.

**I bet you're glad you focused on facilitating that part of the student**





**experience. Beside the boom in users, have you gotten any other feedback from students about how they feel about these technologies?**

We're finding that some of the technologies and services that we put in place to deal with COVID are really going to make a difference in a lasting way. One example is we've always had online classes — self-paced, traditional online classes. But our support services were typically 8:30-5. So if you're an online student and you're taking your class at 6 o'clock at night and you have a question, who did you talk to? IT was closed and other departments were closed. By moving some of our support into the MyTCC portal, we now have a form where students can ask questions after hours and where students can help each other, sometimes before we can even answer their questions.

**It sounds like you expect some of those solutions to stay in place even as we slowly come out of the pandemic. Did you have any other unexpected takeaways that students really responded to?**

When everything went remote, the biggest pressure we had for the kinds of classes students wanted were synchronous online classes. I think students wanted a sense of accountability, a sense of place and time to show up for class, to have a faculty member show up for class and not just be left to their own devices to say, "When am I going to fit in that class, that assignment that I have to do in the LMS tonight?" I think that's here to stay.

At a public two-year institution, getting out of the house can be problematic for some of

our students — they may not have childcare or they may not have transportation when they need it. So the idea that they'd be able to be at home and actually attend a class virtually but live is pretty compelling. I think we'll see some of that continue.

We're humans, we crave interpersonal interactions. So in-person classes are always going to be the standard. But now we've learned that there's a place for other modalities and other ways of teaching that resonate and we'll find a happy middle.

**So you think we'll end up with some kind of hybrid learning situation on a large scale going forward. How do you see that impacting the overall student experience and a student's willingness to invest in their education? Do you think**





**We're humans, we crave interpersonal interactions. So in-person classes are always going to be the standard. But now we've learned that there's a place for other modalities and other ways of teaching that resonate and we'll find a happy middle.**

**Now higher education has to adjust to a new normal and continue to contend with pre-COVID challenges. With all that in mind, what would you like to see change in higher ed in the next few years, in particular in relation to student experiences?**

The biggest thing I'd like to see is to make education available to as many people as possible, without the financial barriers, without the transportation barriers, without the logistical barriers that are there. We need to offer a continuum of educational opportunities.

One of the things I've loved about being at a public two-year institution after spending my career at private four years is that we meet a variety of needs. I remember my first year here, it was at graduation and I was talking to a woman in line to get her diploma who was a convicted felon. She had gotten out of jail and she wanted to become a better person for her family, she wanted to have job opportunities. Were it not for us, she wouldn't have had

that opportunity. She wasn't a four-year residential student, she couldn't afford it and that wouldn't fit her life. But the fact that we were there offering an Associates degree to her made it accessible. The fact that we offer certificates in a particular field — from welding to cybersecurity — that can help students advance their career and the fact that we're a stepping stone to a four year school are all there.

We all need the ability to have the skills we need to meet current needs, but to also know that institutions are there to help to retool, reskill when something comes up and there's a need to pivot. Giving people a lifelong ability to learn is one thing, giving them a lifelong opportunity to learn is something else. Not everything is for everybody, not everything can be affordable to everybody, but we certainly can make educational opportunities available to everybody to give them that first step, give them that next step on their lifelong career to being productive members of society in their chosen fields.

**online classes will waterdown the experience at all?**

I think the traditional four-year, liberal arts schools will have to worry about it more. They're not just selling education, they're selling a lifestyle experience. That's where some of the challenges are being faced now in higher education. What does it look like when you can't have that experience and is it worth the price for that education when you can't have that experience? Versus a community college where you get the education. You get an experience too, it's not the residential four-year experience, but you get an experience. We're looking to replicate as much as that engagement and that connectedness in this time where we're not physically connected as much as we'd like to be.

**Seeing how everything plays out over the next few years will be interesting. The cost of higher education had been a hot topic for a long time before we ever heard the word "COVID" and it's certainly not going anywhere.**





# Your Students are Consumers

**As more students consider themselves consumers of higher education, higher ed institutions can take some cues from more traditional business-to-consumer companies.**

*By Chase Williams*

**W**hile young people have always set trends, it's hard to think of students pushing century-old institutions to change. But it is happening in subtle ways. Today's young students are more vocal than ever about what they expect in their lives, including from the companies, influencers and institutions they engage with. Our culture is hyper-connected, and no one is more plugged in than the people born this millennium.

What that means for higher education is that we have to think about students and prospective students differently. While we must of course think of students as learners, we need to think about them as consumers too. Consider the world young people have grown up in and the influence they now wield on the economy. Gen Z now accounts for 40% of the global consumer base and has spending power that reaches upwards of \$150 billion, according to a report by McKinsey & Company. The sleek "give them what they need before they know

they need it" world of Apple products and Google Search has existed for as long as they have. The notion of corporate responsibility and green initiatives aren't new or novel to them — it's expected.

These affinities coupled with growing questions about the value of higher education means it's vital that institutions take the idea of student-consumers seriously. A college isn't just competing with colleges anymore. More and more, higher ed institutions are being judged against all products and experiences. And given the everyday applications that play such a large role in young consumers' lives, they're increasingly judging the overall quality of institutions based on the digital experience provided.

I've detailed some of the important expectations young consumers have around technology, followed by the kinds of actions higher ed institutions can take to ensure they're meeting student (and prospective student) expectations.

## CONSUMER TECHNOLOGY EXPECTATIONS

### ■ A Clean, Modern UI

Using online applications has become such a major part of everyday life that just about anyone can instantly recognize a modern versus outdated user interface (UI). Think about some of the websites you've visited that look like they haven't been redesigned since the early 2000s. Odds are you negatively judge those companies (either consciously or subconsciously) and may even take your business elsewhere because of it.

Younger generations are so plugged into the online world that a modern UI is even more important. They judge the value of an organization based on its digital persona. If your UI isn't clean and modern, they may have already written you off.

Websites or applications that are cluttered or look like a link farm scream of being outdated and will likely chase consumers





away. Strong UI is table stakes today and investment there is the easiest way for an organization to project a perception that it's modern.

### ■ A Simple, Seamless UX

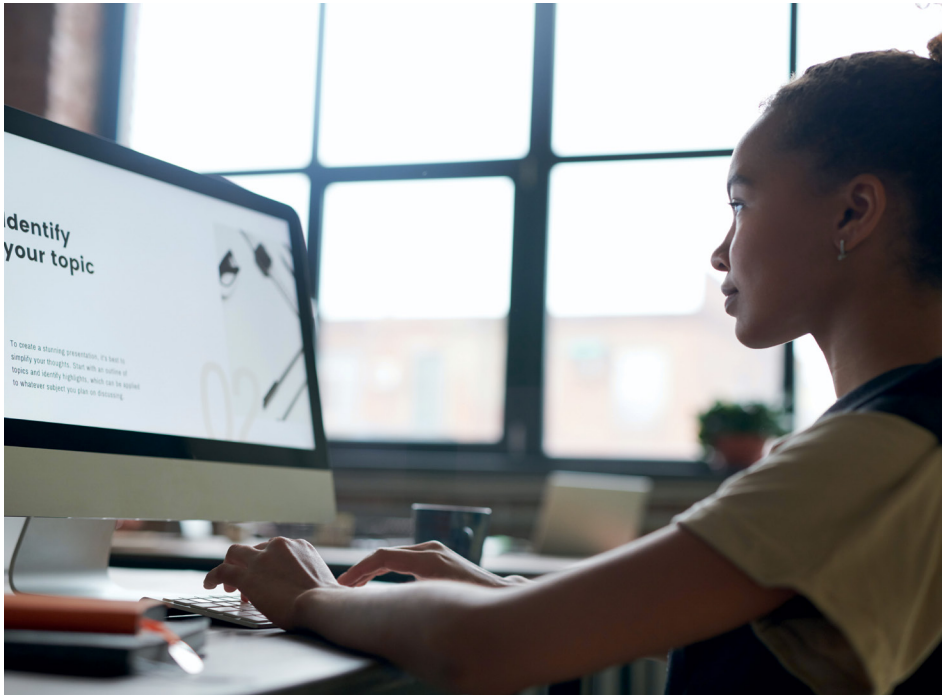
A site or application can't just look good though, the act of using it (the user experience or UX) needs to be seamless and simple. Think about how intuitively you scroll through Instagram and how natural double tapping to like something has become. (Even if it's not intuitive to you, watch a teenager engage with an app and it suddenly becomes clear.) Think about how consumer apps like Spotify are specifically designed to make navigation and discovery easy.

Tablets, particularly Apple products, are one of the best examples of this. We've all seen videos of a toddler using an iPad. It's not because they're baby geniuses or even because they (or their parents) spend too much time on technology. It's because they've seen adults do it and it's literally just that intuitive. One finger to swipe, tap and you're engaged — minimal fine motor skills required.

Importantly, achieving a great user experience is much harder than many organizations think. It's more than superficial personalization that pretends to know the user. And it's much more than a mobile app that gives users access "anywhere and everywhere."

What I'm referring to is an obsession with understanding your user and how best to move them through your experience.

- How do your users onboard and understand the purpose of your experience?
- How do your users expect to find things on your platform?
- How easy is it for them to find things? Do they have a single place to go?
- What default settings are in place based on the user's persona?
- How easy is it for them to update their preferences?
- What user information enables you to take the experience to the next level?



Building an ideal digital journey receives an enormous amount of time and energy in the everyday applications students engage with. When it comes to higher ed, their experience should be just as easy and engaging.

### ■ Start-to-Finish Convenience

Almost everything about user expectations these days comes down to one fundamental concept: convenience. Good UI and UX are convenient. But support when something goes wrong also needs to be convenient. Think about a time you've had a frustrating experience trying to solve a problem or connect to customer support. There are many modern companies that make it a core tenant to "do support better" because of this.

Allbirds, the shoe company, is a great example. They sent me shoes that were the wrong size, but had the simplest exchange

experience. It almost made me happy to have gotten the wrong shoes! Even mega companies like Amazon are putting increased emphasis on convenience. To return an item you simply need to click "return" and drop the package off at a UPS store. No need to print a shipping label or even rebox the item.

As consumer experiences become more convenient, students are rolling those expectations over into other areas of their lives, including higher ed. Higher ed leaders must ask themselves how they can make all aspects of their institution more convenient for students, particularly as part of their digital experiences.

### ■ Intention & Care

Being socially aware and responsible has exploded into a major pillar of society. Especially for young people, there are no ifs, ands or buts when it comes to being socially conscious. You must be aware and take meaningful action or risk being called out.

Students see companies like Bombas (who donate a pair of socks for every pair sold) putting care about employees and the world front and center. For the first time in history, care for employees and the world at large is a driver of growth.

As consumers place greater importance on this, more and more organizations are becoming certified as B Corps. Any organization can become a Certified B Corp, regardless of their product or service. B corps meet the highest standards of social and environmental performance, public transparency and legal accountability to balance profit and purpose, and have made it easy for consumers to find companies they want to do business with.

While consumer-facing companies are leading the way, students have now seen this approach work and are expecting more organizations they engage with to move in that direction.

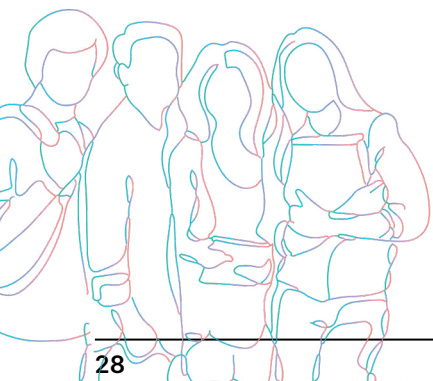
## MEETING CONSUMER EXPECTATIONS IN HIGHER ED

Now that the latest consumer expectations are clearer, the question becomes how that translates into tangible actions higher ed institutions can take.

Fundamentally, it requires a shift in thinking and a dedication to providing modern, engaging and delightful experiences. But there are also concrete steps institutions can take.

### ■ Focus on your Shopfront

One of the most obvious places modern UI and UX come into play is with an institution's website, mobile app, student portal and other student-facing technologies. At this point, we all know what a good, intuitive digital experience looks and feels like — you've experienced it in the consumer world. Take a look at your institution's website, mobile app and student technologies and ask yourself honestly if they meet those standards. If you're finding yourself frustrated when trying to use one of these solutions or thinking the experience looks old, just imagine what your digital native students are thinking. Like it or not, these digital experiences are a reflection on your institution as a whole. If something looks or feels sub-par, students will likely perceive the rest of their college experience the same way.







While you can't usually control the UI and UX of purchased software and solutions, you can make design and customization a top priority when evaluating vendors.

### ■ Create a UX Department

The overall user and digital experience is becoming so important that institutions should strongly consider creating an institution-wide department to oversee the entire student journey. Constituents interact with so many different technologies from different departments that institutions are often unknowingly creating challenging, disconnected experiences.

A user experience department or leader can map out the entire student journey and work with all departments to ensure a smooth, seamless and integrated experience “from cradle to grave.” Importantly, this role is different from existing IT or Student Experience ones because it's focused on all experiences — digital and in-person — and extends far beyond enrolled students.

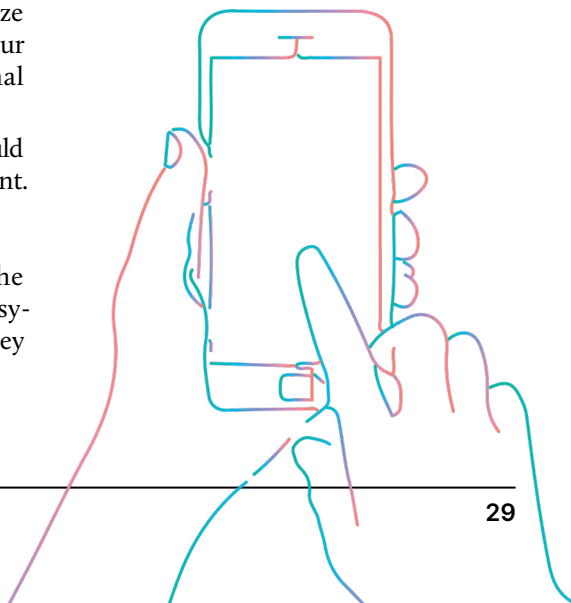
- How are we creating a differentiating experience for prospective students?
- How seamless is the transition from applicant, to admitted student, to onboarding and enrolling?
- What is displayed on the homepage of a user's most important tools? Why?
- What should prospects be notified about, how often, through which channels? Why?
- How easy is it for students to customize their channels and settings across our tools to best fit their own personal journey and preferences?

These and countless other questions should all be in the purview of the UX department.

### ■ Support

While students won't be returning the wrong size shoe, they still expect easy-to-access, on-demand support when they have an issue.

Since students live in an always-on digital world, key support services should ideally have a digital option that allows students to engage when they need to. Going to an office during certain hours is not really how they interact with the world. Instead, coupling in-person options with higher ed focused chatbots and centralized support through customer service platforms are a couple good steps in the right direction.







While not always possible, making it easy for students to get answers to their questions at any time of day is key to providing a great support experience and meeting student expectations.

#### ■ Be Intentional

This is perhaps the easiest and hardest expectation to meet. It's easy to say you'll only work with socially responsible vendors and that the institution itself will be engaged with important issues, but it's not so easy to follow through on. Still, it's critically important to today's students.

Corporate social responsibility may be an idea that lives mostly in the business world, but it's a philosophy that higher ed institutions can adopt. In fact, students are putting increased pressure on schools to think more intentionally about regional and global issues. This goes for the institution itself and for vendors the school works

with. Understanding a company's practices and approach to corporate responsibility needs to become a hallmark of vendor evaluation. When it comes to doing business, many young students expect corporate responsibility to be an important consideration in everything the institution does and everyone it works with.

## STUDENTS ARE MORE THAN LEARNERS

Today's students have been hyper consumers for most of their lives. As such, assessing goods, services and experiences has become second nature. Your higher ed institution is a service and experience they're assessing. Their expectations for what your institution can offer and the experiences they'll receive have been set against a broad benchmark of all consumer products and applications.

While this way of thinking may require a shift from higher ed leaders, students don't even realize they're doing it. This is how they evaluate everything in their lives, why should higher ed be any different? Thinking of students as consumers and working hard to understand their expectations presents an exciting opportunity for higher ed. It's a chance to create better experiences and introduce engaging new initiatives. What a time to be in higher ed!





