Pathify

MAGAZINE

SPRING 2022

TACKLING THE HIGHER ED MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGE

TURNING PROSPECTIVE STUDENTS INTO ENROLLED STUDENTS

WHY COMMUNITY DISAPPEARED FROM HIGHER ED ... AND HOW TO GET IT BACK

IN THIS ISSUE

Letter from the Editor

Welcome to the Spring of Transformation

If this issue had a theme, it'd be transformation. A fitting theme for spring in general and as the country begins emerging from a grueling and heartbreaking two years. The past two years left undeniable and unshakable marks on everything from our mental health to our relationships to the way we engage with and rely on technology. Those life impacts inevitably bleed over into the higher ed ecosystem, leaving institutions grappling with their own changes and demands made on them from students, faculty, staff and everyone they support. The only way to address these demands is transformation to one degree or another.

Transformation often conjures images of complete metamorphosis, but it can be as simple as a mindset shift. Doing something a little bit differently. Putting your focus somewhere else. This issue of *Pathify Magazine* touches on transformations big and small.

From paying more mind to the increasingly critical landscape of mental health in higher ed to successfully implementing technology transformations, Spring 2022 is a time to reframe and restart.

Each insight in these articles is unique and valuable, offering a glimpse into hard-won knowhow and nuggets that might save you some hassle and heartbreak along your own path. Most importantly, it's proof that none of us are alone. Change and struggles — both personally and institutionally — can feel isolating, but it's important to remember that others can offer help and guidance. As Dr. Kris says in *Tackling the Higher Ed Mental Health Challenge* (page 7), "Know that none of us are alone." I hope you find solidarity, inspiration and comfort in these pages as you tackle the year ahead.

Jamie Saine
Editor, Pathify Magazine

Letter from a Student

Academic Anxiety and Resources

As a student, the stress, fear, and uncertainty of school lingers wherever you look. Performance anxiety is a gripping reaction to the fear of failing, petrifying us into submission and making us give in to the convenience of just giving up. Social anxiety tests our limits as we integrate from a pandemic lifestyle of isolation into the clustered walkways of a campus class transition. Academic anxiety is an interesting mixture of these and includes the stressors that compete with your academic work. For example, the deadlines of projects and homework compete with the deadlines of tax season, vehicle registrations, medical appointments, or perhaps the responsibilities of parent life. Soon enough, the shallow waves of these stress-induced feelings become large swells, and the peaceful snowy mountain of your day can escalate into what feels to be an avalanche.

For students in athletics, the performance anxiety before a game or tough practice might completely fluster your daily study routine. However, you learn that the time spent working out, training your body, adapting muscle memory, and building trust with your team builds a confidence that causes the anxiety to slowly wither — perhaps not all the way, but to a point that is manageable. The same tactic to combat athletic performance anxiety can be used to combat academic anxiety. Building a supportive community, living a healthy lifestyle, practicing positive mental health behaviors while developing the cognitive tools are what you need to win a game against stress and anxiety.

Many assume fighting this academic anxiety is solved by just taking the opportunity to study more. But, as one of the disabled military veteran students on campus, I confess this might in fact have the opposite effect for those struggling with their mental health. For many, it is not finding the opportunity to study that causes conflict, but the ability to study when your mind is not at peace with itself. As a student, parent, and someone dealing with post-traumatic stress disorder, my opportunity to study is fairly easy to find in my day, but then eventually my trauma and negative thoughts do not allow me the ability to study.

When struggling, I refer back to the basics of cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) I learned in 2017. One skill I practice is called cognitive restructuring and reframing. It is a way to reframe your thought process and develop positive ways to deal with your emotions and the way you self-talk (past, present, or future). I will commonly mix this method with journaling and write for ten minutes before I study. When journaling, I will write positive affirmations using words like, *I have*, *I will*, *I can*.

Also, journaling acts as a record for your thoughts, and reading them back gives yourself evidence of how far you've come from the last problem. With a clear mind, I am then ready to focus on whatever my task ahead is.

If you find you are having physical reactions to your anxiety or mental health-related issues, I strongly urge anyone to take full advantage of the resources available to them. At Concordia University Irvine, the Wellness Center's Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) offer both in-person counseling and telehealth appointments to students. Additionally at Concordia, the Staff Sergeant Matthew Thompson Veterans Resource Center provides a supportive community and safe place to talk with a student-led mental health support group called Let's Talk online and in person.

The group is led by Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance facilitators and currently schedules sessions on an as-needed basis.

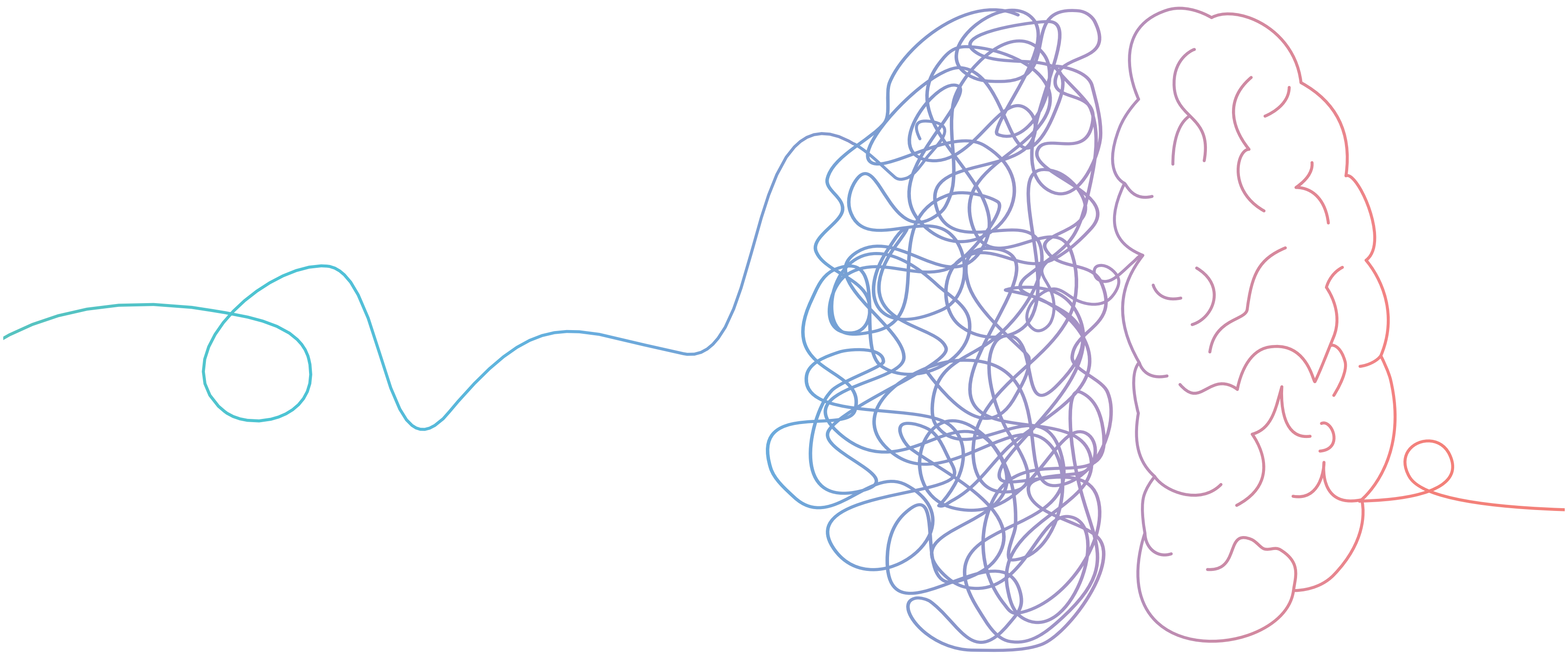
Finally, if you find yourself contemplating suicide, please call the National Suicide Prevention Line at **(800) 273-8255** or use the crisis text line by texting **"help"** to **741-741**. Remember, a healthy mind makes you a better student and a better you.

Matthew Ryan

Matthew Ryan

Concordia Unversity Irvine
Class of 2023

Sergeant, USMC



Tackling the Higher Ed Mental Health Challenge

Advice on creating a healthy mental health culture from Dr. Kris of Active Minds

Of all the issues higher education dealt with during and coming out of a global pandemic, mental health is one of the most pressing and serious ones. It will also have one of the longest lasting impacts. From staff burnout to sky high levels of anxiety for everyone at the institution, the looming question for many in higher ed is "how do we help?"

The Mayo Clinic recently found that up to 44% of college students report symptoms of depression and anxiety. Thirty percent of students felt depressed in the past year, and half felt overwhelmingly anxious. The pandemic and the resulting dramatic changes to everyday life definitely play a role in these numbers. Active Minds reported in its Fall 2020 survey that nearly 90% of college students are experiencing stress or anxiety as a direct result of COVID-19. A quarter of students say their depression "significantly increased." Sadly, 67% of 18-24-year-olds with anxiety or depression don't seek treatment, according to Active Minds.

As we return to gathering in person, a new level of pressure adds to the equation — the pressure to "return to normal" when things are still far from okay. Dr. Kristen Lee (Dr. Kris), Lead Faculty of Behavioral Science at Northeastern University, author of **Worth the Risk: How to Microdose Bravery to Grow Resilience, Connect More, and Offer Yourself to the World**, and a professional mental health speaker with Active Minds, notices new questions looming:

"How do we strive for excellence and rigor while maintaining a sense of wellbeing? Do excellence and rigor need to be compromised? How do we approach this global mental health crisis collectively in a strategic and thoughtful way that helps us get to a better place together?"

The resounding theme in her research is resilience, and what that looks like in a post-pandemic world — especially in the high-pressure microcosm of higher ed. It's a "loaded construct" that needs unpacking and reframing to achieve a healthy mental health culture, according to Dr. Kris.

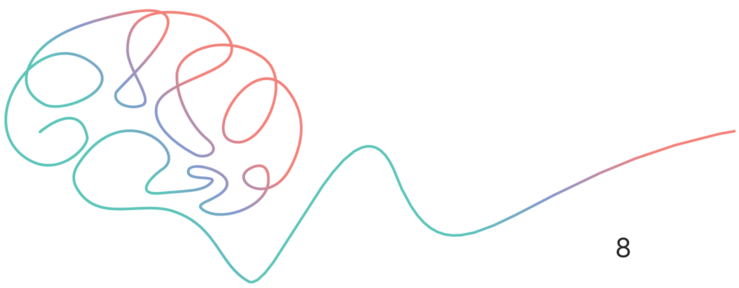
"I want to share a quote because I think it really captures ways we can get to a better place in mental health culture. 'The illiterate of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn and relearn.' — Alvin Toffler."

The ability to unlearn past habits and ways of thinking and relearn our approach to mental health and resilience with acceptance, forgiveness and openness is critical to addressing today's pressing mental health challenges.

CONTEXT IS KEY TO HEALTHY MENTAL HEALTH

Over the past two years, the world underwent struggles on a scale we haven't seen globally in generations. But the whole time, the focus was on "getting back to normal." This myopic mantra ignores the fact that our current world isn't normal. Even when the pandemic does subside, it will have long-lasting mental health impacts that can't (and shouldn't) be ignored. Looking at mental health in the context of 2019 belittles the actual situation.

"It's important to consider the context at hand, especially during times of challenge and trauma," Dr. Kris explains. "We know that, but it's important to remember. Sometimes if we're not remembering, we can see [mental health struggles] as a moral failing on our part."



Keeping context in mind is particularly important in higher education settings, which have many competing priorities. The trick is to maneuver through it in a mindful way.

Dr. Kris recommends looking at institutional priorities and overall mental health through a trauma-informed lens to understand and move through this moment in time. Understanding situational context helps individuals and institutions adapt, adjust and look for evidence-based strategies to sustain and thrive.

"In 2016, the World Health Organization (WHO) asserted that, 'There's no health without mental health.' Mental health is everything. It's more important than grades, test scores, likes on our feed, money in the bank, status, what people think of us," Dr. Kris says.

The world changed, and we need to change with it. Understanding how to address mental health — within the context of today's unique needs and challenges — requires breaking down preconceived notions and taking a new look at what being resilient and mentally healthy means.

MYTHS AROUND RESILIENCE

"What drives resilience? What drives a healthy mental health culture?" Dr. Kris poses. "So much of it comes down to communication, relationships and the way we create the conditions for all of us to be seen."

Unfortunately, resounding myths stand in the way, impacting our perception of resilience in a way that doesn't align with positive mental health. Dr. Kris shares a few of the biggest "resilience myths" that need busting so students, faculty, staff and society as a whole can be happier, healthier and ultimately "be seen."

Myth 1: Resilience is linear, fixed, romantic, boot strappy

"We often have these romanticized ideas of setbacks and comebacks and someone being gritty," Dr. Kris explains. "Then we hear a lot of shaming toward today's generation, 'You guys are just snowflakes, you're weak, you're soft.' We need to look at the context to understand why we need to be resilient in the first place. If we think it's just a matter of sheer will or skills an individual possesses we're missing the point."

It's the idea of resilience for resilience sake. Being proud of the "I walked uphill, barefoot, in the snow to get to school" argument instead of stepping back and recognizing that situation for what it really was — not a character-building life experience but something that was genuinely difficult.

Instead, resilience should be the result of understanding the challenge you're facing, why it's a struggle, seeking (and accepting) help and moving forward as you can. It won't be perfect, but it doesn't have to be a struggle for struggle's sake either.

"Resilience can be very messy," says Dr. Kris. "It's a process with massive redos all the time."

Myth 2: Mental health issues are obvious

You never know who's struggling or what they're struggling with. Committing that philosophy to memory lets you keep the open mind and heart critical to helping yourself and others.

"It's often the person who always has the perfectly ironed shirt and the curated answers and the beautiful pictures on their feed that sometimes make me go 'hmm.' That goes for our students too, the ones that always get the A and have their hand up and are engaged. That might not necessarily signify that they're fine and dandy and that they're ok," Dr. Kris cautions.

Today's global context "can and will affect all of us." Open and proactive mental health discussions plus universal precautions making it easier to speak up and seek help are critical for everyone.

"We need to integrate mental health into our conversations to make it more normalized," Dr. Kris says. "The whole idea of help-seeking and help-giving is much less stigmatized than years ago. We've opened up so much of that conversation, but we still have a long way to go in how we perceive it. A lot of times mental health struggles can be hidden from someone else's view."

Myth 3: I need specialized training to be impactful

Many times, people hesitate to reach out or help because they don't feel qualified. Campaigns like the recent "Seize the Awkward" commercials actively work to dispel this myth. The truth is, the smallest step can be the lifeline someone needs. Sometimes it's easier to open up to a trusted friend, mentor or advisor than to seek more formal, professional intervention — especially if the person feels they need to be resilient and shoulder the struggle on their own.

"The small things can make a big difference and you don't necessarily need to have a clinical degree or a poetic intervention to be helpful to those you serve and care about," Dr. Kris explains.

Simply asking someone if they're okay can be the doorway they need.

Myth 4: The mental health crisis only impacts students

In higher ed, it's easy to focus so much on serving students that faculty and staff forget they need self-care and support too. Especially with the stress of an abrupt transition to remote teaching, faculty, staff and higher ed leaders are particularly susceptible to burnout (which was reclassified by the WHO in 2019 as a condition of the modern workplace).

The Chronicle of Higher Education's 2020 study found a dramatic spike in higher ed staff burnout — a direct result of the pandemic. Faculty stress levels doubled in just a year, jumping from 32% in 2019 to 69% in 2020. More than 50% of higher ed faculty seriously considered changing careers or retiring early.

"What's important for us to recognize as educators and leaders in this space is that we do run a particular risk for burnout — even before the pandemic," says Dr. Kris. "We know that educator burnout has always been a grave concern. So what does it mean to engage in a process of strategic well-being that allows us to stay and do well even within complex times."

It's important to approach mental health in higher education holistically, creating a healthy mental health culture to nourish and support needs across the entire institutional ecosystem, Dr. Kris explains.

"What's good for those we serve is good for us."

Myth 5: Self-care is superficial, selfish and won't work. Plus who has time?

"Treat yourself" has become a cultural comedy skit, but the foundational idea of self-care is necessary to healthy mental health. Getting around the idea that it's selfish or a waste of time is difficult though, Dr. Kris says.

"Self care is a very loaded thing. People think it's salt baths and chocolate cake and treat yourself and #MotivationMonday. It's taken on a connotation that is very superficial. Some of us may even feel guilty, like it's selfish."

Educators in particular have a hard time dedicating time to self-care because they don't feel they're doing enough and that there isn't enough time in the day. Dr. Kris says she often hears from educators around the world that it's hard to find time to implement nourishing strategies that help avoid and mitigate burnout.

"I hear that every day from good people who are trying to show up thoughtfully and mindfully, but feel overwhelmed."

One of the issues is that we stigmatize leisure in our culture, instead of viewing it as necessary and restorative.

"We feel unproductive, we feel lazy if we have leisure. But it's toggling out of the stress and allowing a reprieve. Brain science shows that we are very capable of restoration and homeostasis when we create those moments."

CREATING A HEALTHY MENTAL HEALTH CULTURE

In many cases, busting these myths and creating a healthy mental health culture requires openness and action — from others and ourselves. As Dr. Kris mentioned when discussing resilience, it's a "messy process" that isn't complete overnight — especially with the world in continued upheaval creating new mental health stressors daily. The trick is mindfully pursuing a "we" mindset and cultivating a community of accountability, validation and support.

Helping Others

You may not need qualifications to ask someone if they're alright, but that doesn't make it any less daunting. If simply asking if someone is alright seems too vague, Dr. Kris provides alternatives that may feel more natural:

- How are you coping with all of this?
- What's on your mind?
- What is one thing we could do right now to make this situation better?
- I was thinking about you. Can we schedule a time to catch-up on Friday? (Suggesting a specific time is important for actual follow-up. We all know that a general "let's get together" rarely actually happens.)
- Recall and ask about the "little things" they've shared with you — plans, something they were excited about, etc.
- Ask about something they care about

These more thoughtful questions can encourage people to open up and feel comfortable addressing a difficult topic with you.

"Be sure not to skip over the simple things," Dr. Kris advises. "Sometimes we think the problem is so big, I need to do this big thing. Sometimes we can just start with that beginner's mind of basic regard and basic communication."

When someone does open up, Dr. Kris recommends a tool from Active Minds to successfully approach a potentially awkward conversation — the "VAR" (Validate, Appreciate, Refer) approach. These steps put both parties at ease.

Validate

It's tempting to jump straight into giving advice or trying to help, but that's often not what people need right away. Instead, validate their feelings and experiences first, Dr. Kris says.

"If a student comes to you and they share something difficult that they're grappling with, the first aspect is just that they feel seen, listened to and heard."

A few phrases for these situations include:

- That sounds difficult.
- That makes sense.
- I'm so sorry you're going through that.
- What you're going through is real and valid.
- This sounds super overwhelming.
- It's ok to be frustrated and disappointed.

Stay away from "I" statements, Dr. Kris cautions.

"This is about really making sure the person knows that they've been heard and that their concerns are valid."

Appreciate

Speaking out or seeking help is just as (if not more) difficult as asking if someone is okay. Acknowledge that difficulty and the courage they showed. Statements like "It can be hard to find the words with everything going on these days. Thanks for saying so. It helps to know what you're going through. I appreciate you sharing. Sharing helps us get through this," help put the student at ease and reaffirm their decision to speak up. The key is encouraging candor and candid connections, says Dr. Kris.

Refer

Move to helping only after validating and appreciating. This includes getting more clarification on their challenges and needs, then referring to appropriate support systems if necessary. During this portion of the conversation, Dr. Kris recommends asking questions like:

- What do you do for self care?
- What's your work/school-life balance like?
- How does some fresh air sound?
- What would be helpful to you in this moment?

"It's that triage," she explains. "It's that ability to help hold that space where someone feels validated, their courage is affirmed, and then you're helping them get to a place where they can have someone trained provide the right support."

"It's important to avoid things like trying to fix the issue or rushing to a solution before you validate the experience. Or to be critical or judgmental or to even use our own experiences preemptively. Our own experiences can be very rich and beneficial but it's all about timing."

HELPING YOURSELF

Adopting a healthy mindset, attitude and practices puts you in a better place to help others. By lifting ourselves up, we become supports and models for those who need a helping hand. Dr. Kris has a set of micro strategies for healthier habits and creating a healthy mental health culture on and off campus.

"You don't need sweeping overhauls, it's the small things that can make a difference," she explains. "These strategies can help build traction."

Set Boundaries

The importance of personal boundaries has been a major social talking point over the past few years. The movement in general recognizes you need to be happy and comfortable with yourself first, and giving too much (i.e. not setting boundaries) jeopardizes that.

We often push ourselves too hard, especially with so many competing initiatives and priorities. Boundaries are critical to pacing ourselves and keeping an eye on the long game, says Dr. Kris. Without boundaries, you're not at your best, affecting everything else in your life.

"It's difficult because there are so many pressing needs and priorities, but it's important," Dr. Kris explains. "It's important that we make mental health a priority in our systems, in our own lives and in our relationships. Remember, we're not 'human doings' we're human beings. We're not robots or machines."

Practice Mindfulness

Mindfulness is another popular social trend. It's easy to get caught up in the world, jobs, school, family, responsibilities, daily life, etc. and forget to actually appreciate anything. Dr. Kris recommends practicing awe and gratitude and encouraging that practice across your institution. Celebrating small things, staying in the now and seeking solidarity and community are important parts of everyday life.

Dr. Kris also recommends watching for "that toxic inner critic" and anticipatory anxiety. They'll always be there, but mindfulness helps prevent them from becoming debilitating.

"One of my favorite things to consider is our locus of control. Focus on what is in our locus of control, because so much falls outside of that."

Seek Solidarity

Healthy mental health, especially in a semi-closed ecosystem like a higher ed environment, doesn't happen alone. Mental health challenges often feel isolating, which exacerbates the problem. Solidarity and community combat this challenge.

"Know that none of us are alone. Whatever level of suffering we're experiencing, we're not alone," says Dr. Kris. "The biggest [challenges] like perfectionism, imposter syndrome, anxiety, depression can haunt us and rent that space in our heads and tell us 'you're the only one.'"

Building a community of support and inspiration for individuals and across the institution fights dangerous isolation.

"When we create learning communities and healthy mental health cultures we need that sense of solidarity and collective efficacy, the movement from the 'me' to the 'we.'"

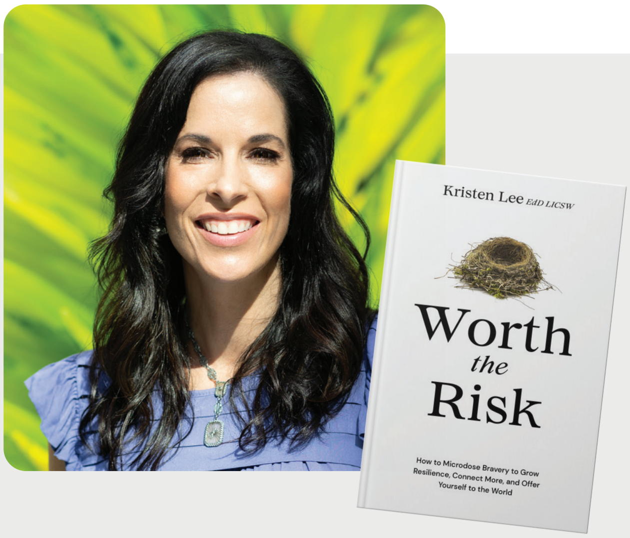
FOSTERING HEALTHY MENTAL HEALTH

Mental health has always been a challenge in higher education, and the anxiety, stress and sorrow of the pandemic ballooned the issue to incredible proportions.

To foster healthy mental health environments on and off campus, we must reject the resilience-obsessed cultural mindset and replace it with openness, vulnerability and support. Knowing how to help others and ourselves is the first step to building an institution-wide focus on mental health and the community mindset required to support healthy mental health.

"What does it mean to create a sense of belonging? Connection is protective and important," Dr. Kris shares. "When we move to a purpose, to a "we" mindset and we adopt this mindset of community, and messiness, it's very protective." ■

To learn more connect with Dr. Kris at KristenLee.com or @TheRealDrKris



Worth the Risk

How to Microdose Bravery to Grow Resilience, Connect More, and Offer Yourself to the World

Discover the rewards of strategic risk-taking—an award-winning behavioral scientist shares a practical guide on using small, intentional acts of courage to build resilience, confidence, and connection.

We're bombarded by messages about how dangerous the world is—from both real and fake news. Yet when we hunker down and try to live in a bubble of safety, we can cut ourselves off from the richness and joy life has to offer. In **Worth the Risk**, Dr. Kristen Lee shows us that by "microdosing" small acts of bravery and connection, we can regain the self-confidence and resilience we need to live full and meaningful lives. "We are hardwired for risk-taking," she says. "As we become more comfortable with the uncomfortable, our nervous system changes to support us in experiencing a bold, adventurous, colorful life."

In each chapter of **Worth the Risk**, Lee provides a solid dose of brain science combined with practical actions to build confidence and sustain yourself through challenges. With a blend of stories, composite sketches, science, ancient wisdom, behavioral science, and practical exercises, you'll explore:

- What is courage? Debunking the myths and discovering the power of everyday acts of bravery
- Why feeling overwhelmed doesn't make you a "snowflake"
- Tools for understanding and regulating your emotions, anxieties, and habits of avoidance
- Healing practices and guidance to increase your resilience to trauma, acute stress, and PTSD
- Insights and strategies for navigating the unique challenges of our polarized, media-saturated culture
- How to own your "Personal Legend" and become an active liberator—for yourself and others

Risks are a part of life—and "playing it safe" can end up diminishing the very qualities that allow us to adapt, create, and serve our purpose in life. **Worth the Risk** guides you through a powerful approach to taking small, values-aligned chances that increase your ability to thrive. "You are not your trauma, labels, fears, or raw emotions," Lee writes. "You are wired for resilience. Your human spirit is indomitable."

Turning Prospective Students into Enrolled Students

From communicating with incoming students to preventing summer melt, institutions get innovative

Choosing a college is one of the biggest decisions of a student's life. Navigating that process is just as difficult — both for the student and for the schools trying to attract them.

"With many of our undergraduate students applying to 10 or more schools, the school that personally resonates most with them is going to top their list," said Allison Garris, Assistant Dean of Admissions at University of Bridgeport. "The way we market to those students and invite them to engage with us is a constantly evolving challenge."

An absurd confluence of factors — from looming enrollment cliffs to a global pandemic to a generational shift in information gathering and communication preferences — are forcing a sea change for schools wanting to remain competitive.

Higher ed institutions across the country are adjusting how they reach out to, engage and — most importantly — support prospective students during the critical application and enrollment process. From new technologies to a more holistic understanding of student success, admissions is evolving.

THE PANDEMIC PROBLEM

The move toward student body diversification and preparing for the looming enrollment cliff kept admissions and enrollment offices busy enough in the 20-teens. Then the world turned upside down in 2020.

The enrollment cliff hasn't abated and building a diverse student body is as challenging as ever, but suddenly enrollment numbers bottomed out early. Fall 2020 enrollment dropped 2.5%, nearly twice the rate of enrollment decline compared to Fall 2019, according to National Student Clearinghouse. Numbers are slow to recover, with Spring 2022 undergraduate enrollment down more than 6.5% compared to 2019.

COVID-19 didn't just impact enrollment numbers though, it fundamentally shifted how the students who do enroll engage with institutions. From hybrid learning options to more virtual admissions activities, today's students expect digital engagement. Higher ed institutions need to adjust accordingly to meet students "where they are," according to Garris.

"COVID challenged higher ed to develop a new perspective of what students are looking for. While most of our engagement for transfer and graduate students is virtual because of the convenience, we can never lose sight of the impact their decisions will make on the rest of their lives," she explained. "If 'meeting where they are' means connecting virtually while they make dinner and tie their kids' shoes, that's what we do."

THERE'S A RIGHT WAY TO COMMUNICATE

Beyond "meeting students where they are," targeted and intentional messaging is another key element of engaging today's students, according to Joe Guarneri, Assistant Director of Enrollment Communications at Sacred Heart University. Learning as much as you can about prospective students when they're applying facilitates a more effective, tailored approach to outreach and communication.

"Targeted communication is proven to work," Guarneri explained. "Within higher ed and enrollment we know that the more personalized interactions a student has with a university, the more likely they are to enroll or at least to go to the next step of the admissions funnel."

While students want personalized communications, they want to engage on their terms and at their own pace. Garris noticed a marked difference in how prospective students consume information over the past few years.

"The students we're dealing with now want to do their research in private, to fly under the radar," she said. "So any way we can send them information without their feeling like someone's waiting for a response seems to work better at this time. That is a shift from what we saw before COVID."

This shift forced institutions to embrace different — more modern — communication channels suited to Gen Z students. Chatbots, targeted engagement hubs, text messages and social media have traction with today's rising students.

"Student affairs and enrollment has to tap into social media and social platforms within the university in order to connect students together because they — especially the traditional-aged incoming class — are heavily tech savvy," Guarneri explained. "So you have to reach them with more than just emails. Texting is a big thing now, you wouldn't have necessarily seen that three or four years ago."

Lindsay Page, Annenberg Associate Professor of Education Policy at Brown University, focuses her career on effectively engaging students and is personally involved in implementing innovative communication channels, like AI-powered chatbots. She's seen impressive success for schools that align communication channels with modern student desires.

"In general in my work, when universities use these kinds of tools [like chatbots], students opt out at pretty low rates, say 5% of all students that you're working to reach," she said. "In general over time, as long as you're sending messages that are relevant to students and that seek to engage students when they need to engage, we see a high rate of students writing back into the system to ask questions or even just to say, 'Hey thank you for the communication.'"

WHAT STUDENTS WANT

As Page alluded to, proper communication channels are most successful when coupled with the proper message for incoming students. Mindfully assessing how to reach your target audience and what they want to hear is critical to successful communication and relationship building, Garris explained. And that isn't necessarily the same for older students as it is for incoming freshmen, she noted.

"Graduate students want to meet with faculty and current students, which can be done virtually. Transfer students want the same, but are also focused on their credits transferring," she said. "Freshmen present the biggest challenge: they want to know what it's like to be a student and to understand the college experience."

University of Bridgeport meets that need by incorporating current students into their outreach programs, including through direct outreach and as the lead voices during virtual events.

"We advocate for in-person visits, but when prospective students can't physically come to campus, we offer virtual events," Garris said. "And we've brought more current students into the spotlight. While we still have administrators and leadership in those virtual sessions, we put our students at the forefront to share their experiences here."

Overall, paying close attention to what students want and need helps institutions as a whole support students throughout the entire lifecycle — from prospects to alumni.

"The big thing is that depending on what you're trying to get across, you have to push that in your communications. And you have to continue that past the enrollment stage," Guarneri explained. "For example, if a student chooses a school based on something like flexibility, the academic advisors have to keep up that theme of flexibility, so you have to have online academic advising hours, do things virtually. The big thing is to communicate what they want and keep that up after they're here on campus."

Embracing modern (at times anonymous) communication channels and paying close attention to unspoken student needs extends past initial outreach and communication, enabling institutions to keep prospective students engaged and even address acute issues driving summer melt.

PROACTIVE HELP = AVOIDING SUMMER MELT

"When we define summer melt we typically talk about students who get to the end of high school, they graduate and during high school they worked to put a college plan pretty well in place. They applied to college, they've been accepted to college, they're on their way to accessing financial aid if they don't already have a financial aid package. So these are students who, when they literally or virtually walk across the graduation stage, everybody would say, 'OK, the expectation is that that student is going to college.' And then summer hits," explained Page.

"The summer is a period of time for first time college goers where the rubber meets the road when it comes to college-going," she continued. "It's a time when students have to navigate a lot of different processes like paperwork and placement exams and paying the bill."

The major issue underlying summer melt is a lack of support for navigating this strange, complex new world. Higher ed institutions do their best to guide students, but it's often through outdated channels, like a complicated website where students need to know exactly what to search for if they want to stumble across the correct information.

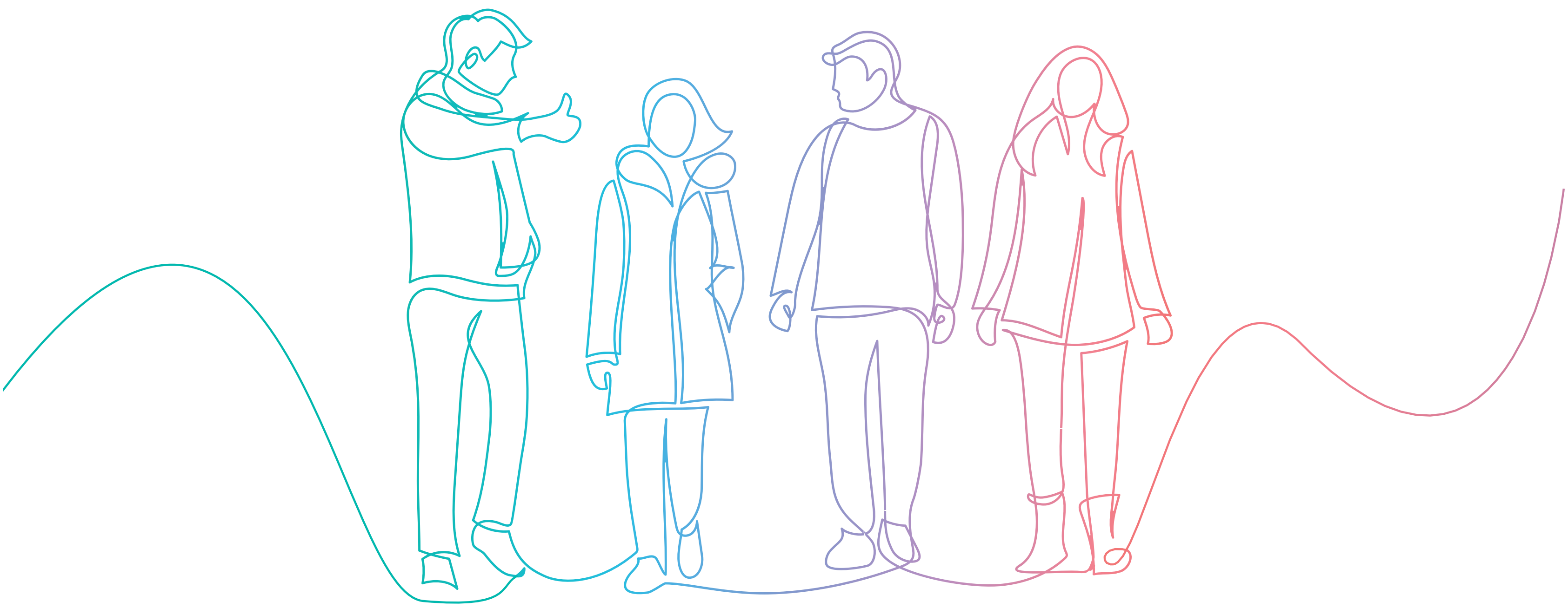
"Think about [traditional] channels of communication for students and families about what they need to be doing. Oftentimes, that kind of stuff is rather opaque," Page explained. "Universities are organizationally complicated, administratively diffuse organizations, so helping students and families understand the connection and disconnection among offices and how to navigate different offices on campus would likely be helpful."

That summer between senior year of high school and freshman year of college is a huge change with a major lack of official support, Garris said. It's understandable that students become overwhelmed and check out — even if the task they put off means they can't start classes.

"Prospective students and their families don't really have ready access to well-structured guidance during the summer," Garris explained. "Yet it's a time when they are asked to make weighty decisions about paying for college and to navigate a lot of processes. That confluence of factors can lead to a situation where their college plans are really untenable."

If admissions offices aren't careful they become complacent, relying on the ways they've always done things, regardless of their efficacy for today's students. It's important to remember that you operate within the higher ed bubble, so things that make sense to you may not be logical to those outside the bubble, Garris said.

"We're experts in higher ed processes because we're familiar with those systems," she cautioned. "For students, it can be overwhelming. They don't understand it, they get lost, or as we've seen, they put things off. They think, 'I can't deal with this and I'm going to pretend it's not there.' Then all of a sudden class starts tomorrow and they didn't figure it out. Now what? There's no reason why those students shouldn't start, they just need someone to guide them."



Proactive initiatives address this exact issue. From workshops to guided to-do lists, universities are uniquely positioned to know what incoming students need to do and guide them through this potentially confusing process. It's a natural resource extension, explains Page.

"Colleges really have perfect information about what students need to be doing in the summer and whether they have done those things," she said.

University of Bridgeport introduced incoming student workshops to guide prospects through the collegiate process — from applying to enrollment and beyond.

"We understand that incoming students don't always know what steps to take and they may need hand holding," Garris said. "Rather than waiting for those students to ask us questions, we create events and spaces for them to access the information proactively. We anticipate their needs and reach out right away."

"Our program is a path that incorporates college readiness and comfort with the admissions cycle," she continued. "By the time of orientation, we want our students to already be familiar with the things they'll need to be successful ... and not just studying. What are the options for paying your bill? Where do you find tutoring? We create a wrap-around model of support."

Page is involved with implementing AI chatbots that both proactively reach out to students and serve as an easily-accessible FAQ center. When the chatbot doesn't have an answer, it instructs students to contact the appropriate office for help.

"We used the chatbot to proactively reach out to students to remind them of the tasks they needed to navigate and also to serve as a system of two-way communication where students could raise their hand and ask questions," Page said.

Taking a proactive approach is successful for many institutions, helping reduce summer melt and ease the transition to higher ed.

"We basically found that this [proactive] system helped students complete all of those pre-enrollment tasks at a higher rate and also helped students enroll on time at a higher rate," Page said.

Two-way channels of communication not only proactively guide students through the admissions and enrollment processes, they also offer a safe space to voice concerns and vulnerability — like the fear of being dropped from classes for an unpaid bill. While help is always available, the student must seek it out. Remaining quiet can bring the student's journey to an abrupt halt — something neither the student nor the school wants. Digital communication channels that today's students are comfortable with make the act of reaching out easier, Page believes.

"It gives students a psychologically safe channel for raising concerns and asking questions and getting help. Sharing that kind of information face-to-face might be socially more challenging for a student because it's a pretty vulnerable thing to say out loud," she said. "My hypothesis is that this kind of tool is a good system of communication because it creates a little more anonymity and distance that may make students feel safer raising those kinds of issues and concerns."

Having a tool in place that makes asking questions and seeking help easier can reduce dropout rates and improve the general student experience. That support keeps a student moving forward on the path to success.

The takeaway is that while students want to research and engage on their own terms, successful schools make it easy to do so. Incoming students don't know what they don't know. Institutions proactively serving information up to students and guiding them through the process standout from schools that maintain the status quo.

BEING FORWARD THINKING

Higher ed institutions are interesting entities. They educate tomorrow's innovators and make groundbreaking research discoveries. But they're also slow to adopt internal change, often running on decades-old systems and solutions. Being open to change and letting student needs drive outreach and engagement tactics are critical to success — especially as competing for students gets more difficult.

"We have best practices and traditions, but we can't be afraid to stop and question whether these still work with students today. Best practices do — and should — change," Garris said. "They are a guide, but by no means law. Best practices from 20 years ago are probably outdated by this point, so let's move on."

Institutions embracing new communication channels, different outreach efforts and guided enrollment programs see positive results, proving it's what today's newest college students need.

Constantly asking who your students are and what they need to succeed should drive everything admissions does, even if that means trying new things, Garris advised.

"If the answer to that question brings you into a space you're not familiar with, you have to be ok sitting in that space," she said. "Consider whether you can make the process better, if you're really giving students what they want and need. When people stop being flexible, stop asking questions, that's when they stop growing. Meeting students where they are and keeping that commitment at the forefront guides everything." ■

The Power of Integrations

Tallahassee Community College

FEATURING:

Brad Nagawiecki
Systems Analyst

Bret Ingerman
VP for Information Technology

Building Personalized Digital Experiences in Higher Education

Right this moment, you have at least one (if not several) smart devices within arms reach. A literal world's worth of knowledge and access to almost anything we want is at our fingertips all the time. It's safe to say that we live in a highly connected world.

Students bring that mindset with them to higher ed, expecting easy access to the systems and information they need without hunting for it. That's why the idea of system integration is increasingly popular in higher ed.

WHY INTEGRATION MATTERS

Historically, best-of-breed higher ed solutions live in siloes. They perform their role extremely well, but they don't connect or communicate with any other platforms. This forces students to jump between programs to accomplish vital tasks and gather important information — a user experience completely out of line with their everyday lives.

"Back in my day, we had Banner and Blackboard and that was it. We didn't download apps. We didn't have tons of websites to go to," said Brad Nagawiecki, Systems Analyst at Tallahassee Community College. "Now students have like five, six different apps that they need."

On the support and technology end, lack of integration also creates a lot of work for institutions. Without an integration mindset, each department request results in a disjointed, standalone solution, said Bret Ingerman, VP for Information Technology at Tallahassee Community College. While at low levels this may not be an issue, it quickly gets out of hand.

"A department comes to us with a problem like needing to communicate with students. So we buy them software to text message. Then someone wants to do word processing or spreadsheets. So we buy a solution that can do that. Then someone else has a need for solution C. So we buy software C," he explained.

"These are individual point solutions. Each solution gets its own product. In higher ed that's how most software was designed, but we wanted to think about this a bit differently."

Instead, Ingerman and his team shifted to an integration mindset where they stopped considering individual solutions and started embracing options that interact, serving both their main purpose and contributing to a larger, more useful solution ecosystem. He thinks of these pieces as "cogs in machinery."

"We could put product A and B together and come up with solution D. Or someone asked for solution E and we can solve that by putting B and C together. We could put all three of them together and come up with solution F," Ingerman said. "The idea is buying products that allow us to connect them to each other and not just have them be individual solutions for individual needs."

With the right setup, you can integrate all information across several applications. However, Nagawiecki recommends focusing on one or two centralized locations to minimize confusion.

"I think there might be some intent to just let students use any app as a jumping off point and try to surface everything everywhere, but it might be better if you funnel them into one or two places as jumping off points. That way it doesn't confuse them or give them too many places to get information."

INTEGRATIONS … WHAT ARE THEY GOOD FOR?

The idea of simply integrating data can be overwhelming without clear use cases. But when viewed as solving a problem the potential of integrations becomes clear. Here are a few common ways TCC takes advantage of system integrations that any higher ed institution can replicate and benefit from.

Targeted Notifications

In our info-overloaded world, it's easy to overlook something. That's why notifications are so important. From that little number on your inbox to a glowing bell icon in social media, today's users are conditioned to look for notifications. Integrating systems together is a great way to pull important notifications into one spot so nothing gets missed.

"Notifications in our myTCC app are just like any other social media platform, it's that notification bell," Nagawiecki said. "Most of these notifications are triggered by things in myTCC, but through integrations we're actually able to create notifications based on stuff that happens in other systems. Right now we're using it for Canvas announcements. So whenever an instructor posts an announcement in Canvas, we actually pull that announcement into myTCC."

Only students in that class get notifications, keeping communications personalized and highly effective. Anyone who's enabled push notifications for an app knows that notifications aren't limited to inside the app. This gives institutions another way to reach students with important information from different source systems.

"If students have the myTCC mobile app, they will actually get a push notification on their phone if it's enabled," Nagawiecki said. "This increasingly surfaces the Canvas announcements to those students."

Solution Interconnectivity

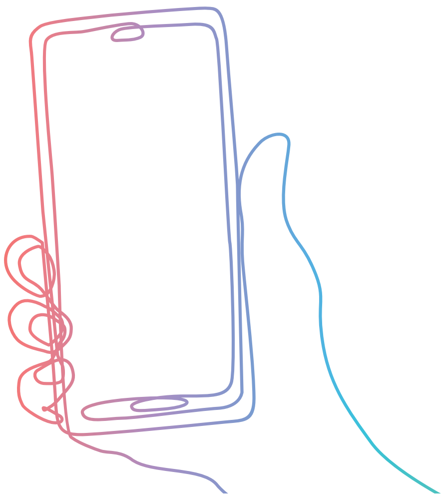
While integrations pull important information from one system to another, they can also easily navigate users between systems as needed. Clicking a link to access another system is a better user experience than exiting one app and launching another, Nagawiecki said.

"If students click on a Canvas notification in myTCC, it'll actually deep link them back into Canvas and take them straight to that announcement," he explained.

This comes in particularly handy when driving users to systems they typically avoid — like email.

"Emails, as far as students are concerned, are kind of becoming archaic. Being able to surface email previews in a much more modern, social media like interface that serves as a jumping off point is really good," Nagawiecki said.

"Based off of some of our analytics, we're looking at about 3,000 to 4,000 clicks a week to jump over to email."



Spreading the Word

Events are an integral part of any college experience ... that is, if you find out about the event. Having the ability to surface events in several places — without extra work — increases the chances of students catching them.

"We have lots of event feeds outside of myTCC and we didn't want departments to have to do double entry. So we have a WordPress calendar that regularly gets its events ingested into myTCC. Students can RSVP and see those events in one spot," Nagawiecki explained. "Before that, those events were just on the website, which the students didn't go to that often. We found that surfacing events this way is really good in terms of getting students to actually go to these events. The fall before COVID hit, we had an in-person event. Student services actually polled students and about 50% said that they had found out about the event through myTCC. So that was great to see."

Accessing a Single Source of Truth

The amount of data and information attached to students is incredible, and one piece of incorrect data somewhere can derail their higher ed experience. You need a single source of truth to keep everything running smoothly. While the SIS is typically that source for many institutions, it doesn't do much good if data is stuck in the SIS. With integrations, it doesn't have to be.

"Our SIS system has all of our data in it — how many credit hours a student has, who their advisor is, if they're a veteran or not, if they have any registered accommodations, what their graduation status is, and what their program of study is. Integrations can pull that SIS data into another platform," Nagawiecki explained.

And because integrations aren't limited, missing data can be augmented from another system. That's the beauty of connectivity. ■

Energizing Your Institution Around New Technology

Technology is the underpinning of higher ed institutions, but it eventually needs to be replaced or updated — especially as some systems are old enough to go to college themselves now. Despite how quickly people embrace new consumer technology, they're often hesitant to learn and adopt new solutions at the institutional level. A lack of willingness and excitement sinks many technology initiatives.

So how do you get your institution and users energized about new technology? Jeff Ledoux, Manager, Web Applications Team at Johnson & Wales University, shares what he learned following a successful overhaul and relaunch of JWU's student portal.

Here are some of his top takeaways and bits of advice.

JWU

FOCUS ON USER EXPERIENCE

It's not about what you want, it's about what the users want.

Whether the technology is for students, faculty, staff, a specific department or someone else entirely, focusing on the user experience for the tech's core audience is key to successful adoption and continued engagement.

Jeff's Thoughts

One of the most important things for my team is the user experience. It's so important for not only adoption, but also to retain users. If any solution isn't easy to use or intuitive, then people just kind of go to it for their weekly, monthly things and don't spend a lot of time in it. That's something we wanted to resolve. One of the pillars for my team is that technology should never get in the way of what a user needs to accomplish at any given time.

TALK TO STAKEHOLDERS

Don't assume you know what users need, actually ask them.

Getting end user input before deciding on and implementing new technology ensures you understand what they actually want and need in their daily lives. Giving them features they want is a clear path to adoption ... and can save you a lot of wasted time and resources.

Jeff's Thoughts

We talked to a bunch of students and the student government association [for our student portal project]. We got data about what the students like, but more importantly what they don't like. Those are things you can actively change. Whereas the things they like, you obviously want to replicate it almost one-for-one, if you can.

It's important to listen to your users. You might have your own ideas, but it's always nice to listen to your users and be like, "Oh, they're actually thinking about that in a different way than we are." We had an initial strategy of what we wanted and talking to different university areas actually helped us fill in different strategy holes that we might or might not have seen, or we needed to get a little more in depth on.

Then you can either take their idea or marry the two ideas that you have and make a much better product — which is what we're looking for anyways.

DRIVE INSTITUTION-WIDE EXCITEMENT

Getting input isn't enough to make an initiative successful, much less get people energized about it. For that you need to go a step further and drive active multi-department buy-in.

Jeff's Thoughts

We knew we needed to get buy-in from a bunch of university areas. So students, academics, financial services, enrollment management, marketing — we talked to all sorts of different university areas. We knew we needed to get the university excited about the project in order for it to be a success. That's exceedingly important.

I think that helped make our project a big win. For the university areas that got really excited about the project, it allowed them to start getting their ideas turning much sooner than if we were to launch and then be like, "Here's your new tech." We were talking to them six, eight months beforehand.

You need to get them excited. Hold their hands, really hold their hands. If this is a thing you need them to join you on, you need to keep this top-of-mind in some way, shape or form. That's not emailing them every hour, every day. But if you have a light bulb moment about a system they use that you might be able to improve, that's your gateway into getting them excited about it. All of a sudden it turns into, "Oh, this isn't a thing being thrust upon me to. This is actually a thing that I can be a part of."

This gives people a seat at the table so that it isn't coming barreling through the doors like, "This is a thing we want to do and we're gonna do it." They instantly feel like they're involved. They have a seat at the table and in the success of the project, which is really important. It starts breaking down walls.

IDENTIFY SUPER USERS … AND RUN WITH THEM

With all the work of talking to different stakeholders and getting buy-in across the school you'll likely run into a few people who are extra excited about the project. Capitalize on their excitement. Turn them into super users and help them help you along the way.

Jeff's Thoughts

The biggest thing to do is to identify who your super users are going to be. With our project we had a couple of them. Career Services got involved really, really, really quickly. Student Academic Services is also one of our super users. That group is always thinking about "How do I use this technology for this, that and the other thing." That's what you want. You want people asking those questions and coming up with their own ideas.

We got them really excited about how they could use the new technology and they just took off and ran with it. And that's what you want, right? It's not gonna be everybody, but even if it's one or two people, others start seeing what they're doing and then hopefully that filters to other university areas and they start getting excited about it too. Like, "Wow, how do we do these things?"

ENCOURAGE OWNERSHIP

Since super users are already bought in at a high level, empower them to take even more ownership of the new technology. If you think about it, it's a natural progression:

Talk to stakeholders

Get buy-in

Identify super users

Give those super users (partial) ownership of the solution

As users imagine exciting new use cases for the tech, they get more excited to actually adopt it. They're more willing to jump in and actually help with daily tasks that keep their piece of the solution optimized and running smoothly. This takes pressure off centralized IT teams.

Jeff's Thoughts

Early on in the project, no idea is dumb. Let other departments fire a list of ideas at you. Especially with a "blank slate" technology, you can almost always give them what they're looking for. Maybe not right away, but it gives you a good roadmap, which is also important because you don't want to launch and forget about it. You always want to be improving.

Then let those super users create the content for you. We want to decentralize our content. We do this on our website. We have a bunch of people trained there to edit their own content so we don't get a bunch of web edit tickets every single day. That moves from one person maintaining everything to empowering users. We want to do the same thing with more of our technology solutions.

GET VISUAL

Different people have different learning styles. Especially when evaluating a new technology, seeing is often believing. Otherwise it's hard to envision the system in action and imagine its impact.

We've all sat through enough PowerPoint presentations to know bullet points are dry and not very convincing. Instead, Jeff recommends showing off the product and even jumping into live demo scenarios.

Jeff's Thoughts

With our portal project, our slide deck was filled with screenshots. People are really visual and we found it's much better to have screenshots everywhere instead of blocks of words. To that end, if you have a demo environment running, you can start building examples. When you have these demos, you can skip out of the slideshow and actually show real life examples.

We also filmed a really good video about what the new solution is going to look like. For our project, most of our staff was not in the old portal, so this was a new thing for them. So we filmed a two minute video cruising through the portal and narrating it. It was really good.

EMBRACE FEEDBACK EARLY & OFTEN

Finally, listen to what people say when they actually use the product. Grand plans and anticipated features are great, but nothing compares to actual hands-on use. Get early feedback so you can make adjustments if needed before larger-scale rollouts.

Jeff's Thoughts

If you can, get users in there early and start getting feedback right away, before you even launch — like a soft launch or beta. That feedback is amazingly important because then when you do launch you're already pseudo successful.

No one actually said, "This is a bad idea." But if someone did, I think we would've taken it into consideration and had a deeper conversation with them. We were sold at the beginning, but we also left it open and asked, "What do you think?" That's really important. We didn't want to make it feel like it was just our decision.

Sometimes there's just one conversation, but sometimes it took more than one conversation. ■

4 Keys to Successful Digital Transformation in Higher Ed

Featuring Tim Moss, Sr. Project Manager of Information Technology at San Jacinto Community College

Anything "transformational" is a big change, and big changes fail without a defined process.

"I'm a huge process guy. I like to get into the minutia, understand that the processes work," said Tim Moss, Sr. Project Manager of Information Technology at San Jacinto Community College. "The old saying is the devil is in the details — those details are the process."

Processes keep projects on track and set expectations. Most importantly, a well thought out and repeatable process positions projects for success. Unfortunately, robust processes and project management lack in the higher education space, according to Moss.

"Process is something that's missing from a lot of higher education institutions," Moss explained. "The private world and even the public sector has caught on to the value of the Project Management Office and Project Managers. The higher ed industry is a little bit behind on that. So as we continue to catch up, we'll start to realize why some of those processes matter and how it can be a great deal for your organization."

As more institutions embrace digital transformation, they should take a page from the private sector's processes playbook. Digital transformation greatly enhances institutional operations and aligns with today's digitally-driven world, but only if the initiative succeeds. Through his experience, Moss found several key steps in a successful digital transformation process.

> ***"If you have a 2018 Cadillac Escalade, there's no reason to go get another 2018 Cadillac Escalade. You have to make sure that you are improving."***

THE GOAL OF DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION

Digital transformation is on the roadmap for many higher ed institutions. In 2020, 45% of institutions surveyed by Educause were in the process of digital transformation and another 38% were exploring the concept.

While many factors drive digital transformation (enhancing the student experience, gaining better control of institutional operations, modernizing digital offerings, etc.) the ultimate goal is efficacy — improving your solutions, systems and processes.

"Anytime you're doing a digital transformation and you're bringing in new software applications that affect your entire campus, you want to make sure that it is improving the status quo," Moss explained.

"You don't want to get a shiny new product and still have the same workarounds, still have the same manual operation that you have to do every day, and it's still a nightmare for everyone. You want to make sure that you are looking at it from a process improvement standpoint. That's going to increase your efficiency. It's going to improve customer and stakeholder satisfaction. It provides you with a competitive edge over your peer colleges."

Embracing this mindset makes it easier to embrace the need for and process of digital transformation. Following Moss' steps for digital transformation keeps process improvements and efficacy top of mind throughout the entire initiative, setting you up for success.

STEP 1: FOCUS ON THE PROBLEM

Before embarking on a digital transformation project, you need something to transform. Remember, the goal isn't transformation for transformation's sake, it's improvement. Don't blindly undertake a digital transformation initiative. Instead, identify a real need.

Ask yourself (and others at your institution):

- Where are we now?
- Where do we want to be?
- What are our pain points?

If that's too lofty, start by getting everyone to agree that there is a pain point in the first place, Moss suggests. From there you can dig into the problem, identifying the root causes. These causes are the catalyst for digital transformation and the areas needing improvement.

"You have to be a problem solver. You have to be willing to get down in the weeds, to not only identify the symptom of the problem, but to identify the root cause of the problem," said Moss. "It's almost the same as if you go to a doctor with a stomach ache and the doctor prescribes you Pepto Bismol. It takes away the pain, but it's not actually getting to the source of what's causing the pain. You have to be very careful when you're going to identify issues and problems. You have to not just understand the symptom, but understand the root cause and be able to squash that root cause with whatever new processes or technology that you're bringing into your organization."

Taking a problem-focused mindset ensures real needs come before any answers. This is critical to actually fixing the root cause of the issue and potentially saves the institution a lot of time and money.

"Sometimes in organizations, you may have a problem and you know you want to fix the problem, but you don't actually know what the problem is, or what's going to fix it," Moss said. "It's the same as having a vehicle with the check engine light on and having no idea what the problem is but already buying parts. If you buy the parts before you know what the problem is, you come up with a situation where the parts may not fit. Same thing when you're dealing with digital transformation and software technology. Even when you identify that you have a problem, it is very important to understand your needs and requirements. Allow that to drive what the solution looks like as opposed to going out and finding a great solution then trying to find and alleviate problems with that solution."

Understanding the root causes of major pain points and where you want to be after the transformation comes down to one critical task — doing your homework.

"We're all in higher education institutions with bachelors, masters and doctorates, so we know the value of doing our homework. There's no difference when you're doing a digital transformation," Moss explained. "Especially something like a student portal or CRM applications — anytime you're going through some type of digital transformation that has a monumental impact on the way you do business and the way you interact with your customers, your students, you have to make sure you do a great job of doing your homework."

Let this deep dive define project needs, then turn those needs into the project requirements. Taking this stepped approach ensures you arrive at the *right* answer opposed to *an* answer.

"Start with a problem and search for an answer opposed to starting with an answer and searching for a problem," Moss advised. "The second way can cost your college a lot of money, a lot of frustration and a lot of internal grief."

STEP 2: THE SWOT ANALYSIS

Once you've defined the issue and the digital transformation solution, you need to outline a realistic path to that goal. This requires a deep understanding of your unique institution outside of the issue. To set the stage, Moss recommends performing a SWOT analysis. This helps you understand your strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (both internally and externally). This crucial step gives you a lay of the land and sets realistic expectations for project goals, timelines and resources.

Start by outlining institutional and team strengths. This sets a positive tone and gets everyone excited, said Moss.

"Look at what you do well, what qualities separate you from other institutions. Internal resources, such as skill, knowledgeable staff and tangible assets, intellectual property, proprietary technologies, things like that," he explained. "That creates good morale for the team. No one wants to create a team and say, 'Okay, let's only focus on the problem.' No, let's focus on the good stuff first."

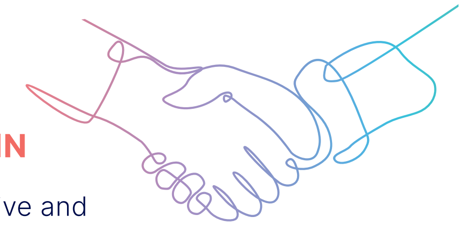
Understanding shortcomings is just as important. While weaknesses is a harsh word, they represent opportunities. Without understanding your weaknesses it's hard to understand where to improve. Moss recommends looking at what your school lacks or what competitor institutions do better.

Finally, assessing threats highlights hurdles you'll almost certainly face during the digital transformation process. These can be internal threats that you can work directly to change, but they may also be external threats that you can do little about, like county, city, state and federal funding challenges. Either way, understanding threats gives you the opportunity to work around them before they stall the project.

"Sometimes limitational resources become an internal threat," Moss said. "It's very important to know what the threats are so you can do everything in your power to mitigate those and try to move past those."

The ultimate goal of the SWOT analysis and "doing your homework" is understanding where you currently stand, what you're capable of and where you should improve.

"After you process what you do well and what you don't do well, you take your weaknesses and you turn them into opportunities," Moss explained. "Weaknesses don't have to be a bad thing. Now they become opportunities for improvement."



STEP 3: GENERATE INSTITUTIONAL BUY-IN

Part of a successful deep dive and SWOT analysis is ensuring you're talking to the right people from day one. A single department or project manager doesn't understand everything going on at an institution. They may not even use the software that's causing the pain point on a daily basis. Getting outside input is critical to identifying the right pain points and understanding the real root cause. Working with people across departments early in the process generates the early buy-in critical to project success.

"You want to get buy-in on the front end so that you don't have worries on the back end that will lead to failure of adoption," Moss explained. "If you fail to adopt a platform that you've spent so much time selecting and implementing, that would be an overall miserable result. So you want to get that buy-in on the front end, making sure you have senior management, middle management, as well as front level staff all on the same page as you begin to dissect your problems and needs."

By involving different levels of insights and input you not only identify the true problem, but energize people around successfully solving the issue.

"I like to call it the determination factor, that urgency, that passion, that fire," said Moss. "When everyone says, 'Yep, we understand the need for change. We don't know exactly what that change is going to look like, but we're all on board and we understand that it must happen and it must happen now.'"

Without urgency for change, involvement with the project and final adoption are often lack-luster, dooming projects before they ever have a chance to succeed. A lack of buy-in at the beginning is an issue Moss hears about often.

"You did a great job of going out and selecting a solution. You did your homework, you implemented it, it's running live on your campus, but nobody's adopting it because nobody's bought into it," he explained. "Now you have another fancy piece of technology that is not being utilized by the students for the betterment of your organization. It's very key that you get buy-in from the very beginning, at the 'Houston, we have a problem' stage, as opposed to the 'Houston, we have a solution' stage."

Waiting until implementation and launch to drum up excitement for a project fails because end users weren't involved with identifying and assessing the problem, so they don't have full appreciation for the new solution. They don't feel part of the process or like their opinions were taken into consideration. No one likes being handed a new solution without being consulted first.

"If I was trying to get organizational buy-in at the implementation stage, I would've already failed. I would be in deep trouble," Moss said. "You need to do a deep dive early [with front level staff] to understand their pain points. They'll tell you. Everybody is very, very good at telling you about what their pain points are. What's affecting their day-to-day ability. When you get the front level staff involved early, you get that buy-in."

While including different levels of management throughout the process is important, Moss particularly encourages engaging front level staff early and often. Senior leadership may have an overall understanding of institutional goals and direction, but they're often somewhat disconnected with everyday university life. Soliciting input from front level employees ensures the digital transformation has an actual impact on real "on the ground" issues that need addressing.

"When you have buy-in from the front level staff, those are going to be your most important people because they're the people on the front line responsible for administering that product every day," Moss said. "They're the customer-facing people, the people that see the students every single day. When you have that buy-in, then you do a great job. How do you get that buy-in? You involve them in the process. Everybody wants to be heard. Make sure you are articulating to them that they are a clear stakeholder."

When dealing with student facing initiatives, soliciting student voices is also important. Students won't adopt a new technology simply because the institution implements it — especially if it doesn't meet their high digital experience expectations.

"We reach out to students and ask, 'What are some of the things that you guys would like to see from a student perspective?'," Moss explained. "When you have students involved in that process, oh my God, everything is great. We have to remember in higher education that they are students, but they are our customers. This is still a business. They are paying their dollars."

STEP 4: DEVELOP INTERNAL CHAMPIONS

Buy-in across the institution is critical, but to really push a project along you need strong internal champions. These people take buy-in to the next level and help drum up excitement about the project.

"When you have someone championing the project, facilitating it from the beginning to the end, you're able to execute faster," Moss explained. "To have an internal champion, it works wonders. It does miracles."

These internal champions should promote the project from the point of conception through implementation and adoption. Finding them early in the process often isn't hard, Moss said.

"At the first meeting I see who's the most talkative, who's the most enthused, who has the most to say. Those are the people that I want. I want the people that are not afraid to speak up. I want the people that know the frontline issues — those are your internal champions. They go back and spread the good gossip. They can ensure that they're talking to their leadership as well as their peers who are also on the front line. That's how the project begins to spread and cultivate throughout the colleges."

If possible, find multiple internal champions. Digital transformations are no small undertaking. The more passionate voices pushing the project along the better.

"It's the old saying, 'It takes a village to raise a child.' It takes a village to make sure that everyone has buy-in," Moss said. "Even though you may have someone that's facilitating and leading that process, it is very, very, very important that they are not trying to do this alone."

> ***"One individual trying to bring about change or trying to express the value of change won't move in a tide. It's like throwing a rock in an ocean."***

Internal champions should have natural passion and energy — not be pressed unwillingly into service. You need that passion to spread across the entire institution, generating broad excitement for digital transformation.

"You want people who are not afraid to speak and have passion and energy. You can never teach passion and energy, either an individual has it or they don't," Moss explained. "Find those who have that passion and energy and allow them to be your truth seekers and your truth spreaders. It permeates throughout the departments and before you know it everyone's whispering and everybody's waiting for the next best thing, because they've heard about it. It all comes from ensuring you have those loudest voices that are the most enthused, energized and the most passionate."

EMBRACING DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION

Especially following the upheaval of COVID-19 and the digital scramble institutions undertook to meet drastically altered student needs, mindful digital transformation is critical to paving a successful path to engagement and technology adoption. While it may seem like an IT-heavy project, in reality it touches all parts of campus. Understanding that IT alone can't tackle digital transformation opens your mind to engaging different key stakeholders, which in turn helps you identify real need and find the buy-in and support that drives digital transformation over the finish line. ■

Pathify MAGAZINE

CONCORDIA
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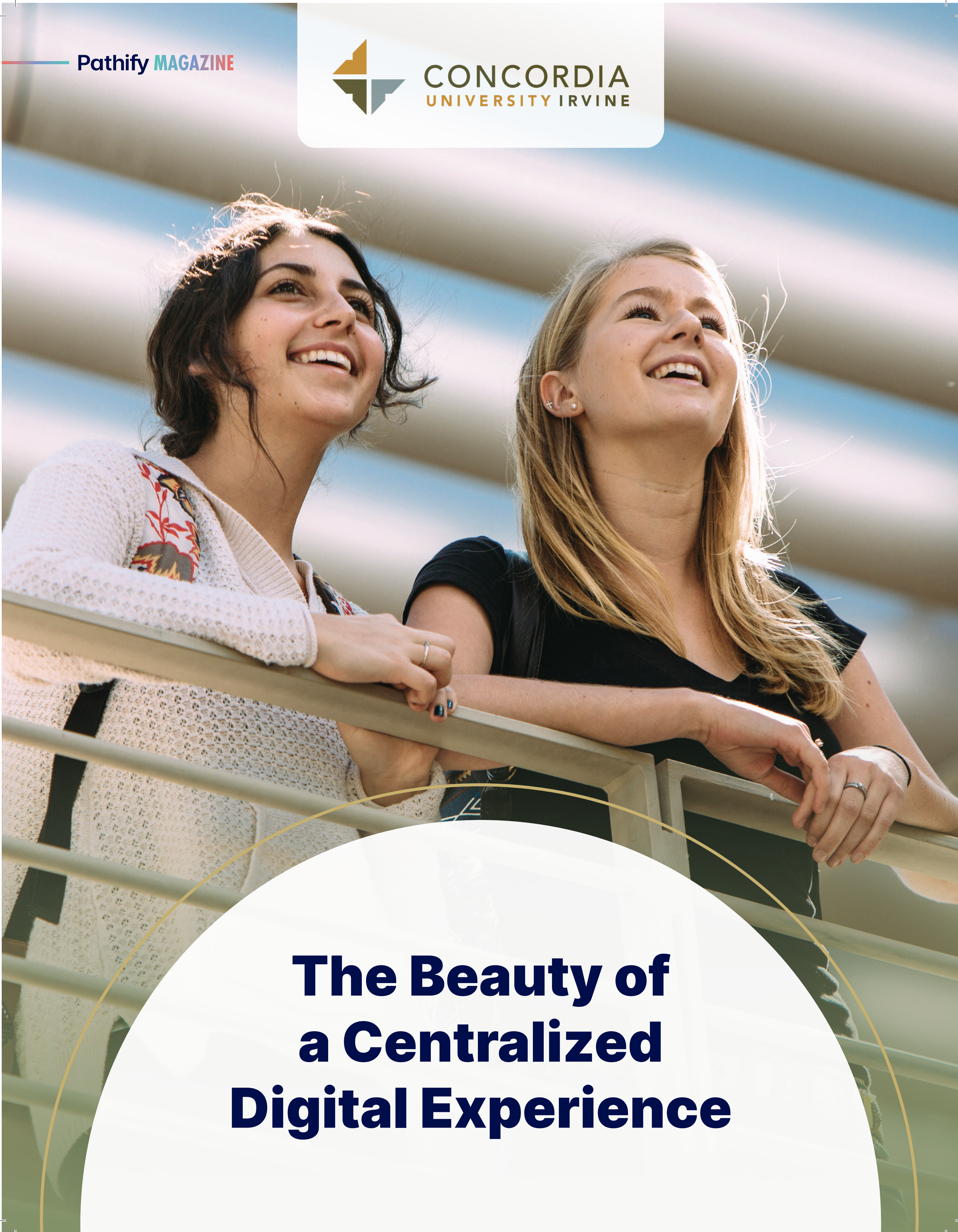


The Beauty of a Centralized Digital Experience

FEATURING:

Deborah Lee
Sr. Director of Institutional Research and Effectiveness

Jessica James
Assistant Director of Orientation and Student Activities

All the information you need in one centralized place. That's the dream of any technology user who's tired of bouncing between websites and apps while trying to remember their passwords. That's also the dream that Concordia University Irvine (CUI) had when re-assessing its approach to sharing information through a mobile app or student portal. Why update those systems separately? Why not combine them into one unified experience questioned Deborah Lee, Sr. Director of Institutional Research and Effectiveness at CUI.

"Last academic year, student affairs started talking about the possibility of a mobile application to enhance the student experience, but why stop there? Instead of just an app, instead of just traditional undergraduates, why not all students, faculty and staff," Lee commented. "How can we integrate our current systems and create one access point that elevates information that matters, making it simpler for users to discover and engage with the opportunities our campus provides today?"

The desire for a centralized experience became more pressing as Lee and her team explored how other institutions tackled the digital ecosystem. They realized they needed an approach more in line with consumer preferences.

"A few of our peer institutions with mobile applications didn't have just one but multiple apps for students to download. Each one did something different. That didn't seem efficient. We all agreed that we wanted to avoid that at all costs," she explained. "I don't think anybody wants a folder dedicated to CUI apps on their phone. I wouldn't."

"We're not asking them to go through a million different websites anymore. It's all unified," added Jessica James, Assistant Director of Orientation and Student Activities at CUI.

EVERYTHING USERS NEED IN ONE PLACE

When creating a centralized experience, CUI made sure it spanned both academics and students' social lives. Their new platform became a digital representation of their entire institutional experience and a way to stay engaged.

"One of my favorite parts about our app is that it combines all of our academic resources with our student involvement and engagement activities. So from the palm of their hand students can access all of these features," James said. "They can find a club, event or activity by simply searching for some keywords or phrases of things that are interesting to them. They can pay their student bill, they can review their academic profile and grad plan. They can check in for events. They can check their Eagle's email, which is a great feature so we can be sure our students are reading their emails. There's no excuse anymore. They can access our learning management system and receive push notifications to their phone — all through this one portal."

Instead of just moving existing features to a centralized platform, CUI also focused on innovative use cases that students would find particularly useful. This led to the creation of a digital ID within the platform that mimics a student's physical ID. Adding platform-exclusive features drives higher engagement.

"The digital ID is our most used feature of the app. About 90% of our usage is mobile, and that is probably because we have a digital ID," James said. "It solves a lot of problems, like students forgetting their ID card when they're going to the cafeteria. Now they don't have to run back to their room because they typically don't forget their phone. With the digital ID, students can easily scan in on the app at our campus coffee shop and cafeteria. This is a great feature that I use almost every day and it gets students to open the app too."

Beyond helpful tools, CUI took extra steps to include important information students might need. Now, instead of hopping between systems and websites, users can do a simple search that returns results customized to their personal user persona.

"With the feedback from multiple departments around campus, we preloaded the portal with frequently asked questions. The goal was to reduce the traffic that departments' received," James said. "They can just type in the search bar and get their question answered."

CUI found an additional unexpected benefit to their centralized platform — the ability to evaluate new software platforms without confusing students. Since students go to the centralized MyCUI platform for everything they need, they don't notice the underlying systems. This allowed CUI to pilot two learning management systems without causing student confusion.

"We are currently evaluating two learning management systems (LMS), Blackboard and Canvas. There are some students who have courses in more than one LMS. If a student is piloting an LMS system, he or she will have access to that link while others do not. The ability to put everything behind single-sign on has allowed students to pass through systems with ease," Lee said.

A major goal of creating a centralized experience for the CUI community included offering students and faculty a similar experience that surfaces the information that matters to them. Both cohorts use the MyCUI app, but see different information.

"Similar to students, employees have access to their emails and find events on campus," James said of the faculty experience. "Faculty members can view their schedule. They can download an up-to-date class roster so they can see if anybody has dropped the class. They can also email their rosters directly in case class has been canceled or has moved online."

Lee experienced first-hand the effectiveness of the app and its ability to surface timely information that might otherwise be missed.

"I was leaving the office one day and I saw that Bella Amore, one of our living learning communities, was giving out succulents. I was passing by that building anyways on the way home, so I grabbed some for my son. If it wasn't on the app, I would not have known," she said.

IF YOU BUILD IT, WILL THEY COME?

While the simplicity and ease of having everything in one place should entice users, "change is still difficult," Lee said. There are a few things institutions can do to drive adoption, from making it easy to use the app to over-communicating about its existence and benefits.

"Prior to launching the app we pre-populated the content we anticipated students needing," James said. "We uploaded every campus event that was scheduled at that point in time, including some of our academic calendar dates like the add or drop deadlines. We included contact information and group pages — every club, organization or student group that was on campus had a group page created specifically for them before they even got to it with the club president information or the advisor's information. We also partnered with campus safety to make sure everyone's ID photos were in the system."

Beyond that, making the experience fun keeps users coming back for more than just the basics. This includes app-exclusive content, contests and giveaways.

"You can [drive engagement] with giveaways, free food — college students love free things, getting gift cards," James explained of CUI's app-exclusive content. "We have our weekly newsletter, the Eagle Insider, which kind of summarizes everything that's happening on campus that week. We have an athletics widget, which has been really helpful for our campus spirit initiative where students can get points for attending any of our sporting events. With the athletics widget they can see that calendar. Now faculty and staff have access to this information as well."

To spread the word about the new MyCUI, the school trained its student leaders to talk about the app, introduced it as a key tool during new student orientation and hosted tables at on-campus events where students could download the app and ask questions. They also made videos promoting MyCUI and how-to tutorials in addition to continuously talking about the platform so it stays top-of-mind.

"Mention it at every single event, include a link or QR code on posters or in emails," Lee recommended. "Print QR code stickers so that students can put them on their water bottles."

MAKING FEEDBACK A TWO-WAY CONVERSATION

Another key to driving adoption and engagement is ensuring the platform matches real user needs. Centralizing existing resources and even introducing engaging app-exclusive content helps, but not as much as including features end users request.

"It's really important to allow end users to provide feedback," Lee noted.

Soliciting user feedback creates user buy-in and makes them feel responsible for the platform. Feedback shouldn't be a black box though. Letting users know you heard them and value their input is critical. CUI found a way to accomplish this in the same platform.

"We have a page called MyCUI Update that features known issues that others have brought up previously. This helps eliminate duplicate helpdesk tickets. People are actually checking this page to make sure it's not user error," Lee said. "It describes what the issue is, where it's located on the platform and what the current status is. It also includes a list of resolved issues and when that issue was resolved. This is where we show users we have heard them."

CUI also shares a list of planned features with estimated release dates, keeping users coming back as the app continuously improves.

THE DIGITAL EXPERIENCE IS THE SCHOOL EXPERIENCE

The digital world is the real world for many of today's students. Offering an immersive digital experience that reflects your institutional culture aligns with the way students engage with the world. Schools put a lot of time and effort into providing critical resources for students and staff, but as the world shifts, getting users to engage with those resources is increasingly difficult. Creating a centralized user experience solves this problem. It's a new and exciting path forward for higher ed institutions, but one that students, faculty and staff are hungry for. ■

Thoughts from a Chief Product Officer

Why Community Disappeared from Higher Ed ... and How to Get it Back

By: Brian Alexander

Chief Product Officer at Pathify

Let's start with a story.

A long time ago, I was a college student at the University of Texas. When I was in college in the '90s we didn't have all of these fancy tools that we have these days. What UT had back then was a phone enrollment system called TEX that was really horrible. It would hang up on you all the time when you were midway through your call. At the end of your call, TEX would very famously say, "Thank you, goodbye and good luck." Sometimes you would hear that "goodbye and good luck" at really inopportune times and have no idea if TEX did what you needed. So most of the time when we were enrolling in classes or looking for clubs we went to campus fairs. I signed up for classes in the gymnasium after standing in line. If you wanted to sign up for clubs you went to the quad where people set up tables once a month for you to sign up.

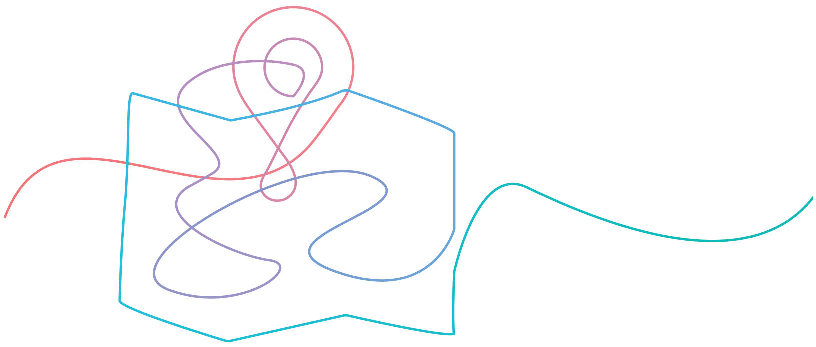
There weren't a lot of tools and you had to wait in line, but there was this real sense of us all being in it together because we were literally in the same room. You could see how popular classes were by how long the lines were. Or you could see which clubs people were signing up for by which tables they went to. It was a cool experience to build this community and feel like I was part of the University of Texas. I knew the people around me.

ENTER ED TECH

As tools came into place and replaced a lot of this, we went from the SIS, this one monolithic system that managed everything and knew everything that was going on, to dozens of fragmented systems. The SIS broke apart into things like dedicated enrollment tools or CRM tools to manage your prospects and students, risk management, event management, etc. The LMS became your homework component — you would go in there and participate in discussions.

Then the LMS fractured to a certain degree and other homework systems came along, becoming the homework for the homework tool. I like to call this "the great fragmentation."

We ended up in this place where none of these systems were talking to each other. We had these great point solutions and all of them were better at their specific purpose than what came before them, but none of them really talked to each other and shared information. Not only that, students now had the responsibility for self service. They had to figure out which of these systems they needed to go to.



People started thinking about this concept of "we need a map" so students can find their way around all this technology. That's where higher ed came up with a portal. Your traditional student portal was a map to all of these systems. If you need to enroll in courses here's the link to go to the enrollment tool. Once you're enrolled, you need to go to the LMS and take your courses and actually do your work. Students would come to the portal, they would find the link to the LMS and they would go to the LMS. There's links to all these tools and many more like tutoring, advising, events, etc. But in researching early portals we found that students were really only using two tools — enrollment and the LMS. They weren't taking advantage of all the other tools available to them because we're in this self service world where they have to find these things themselves.

WHY STUDENT PORTALS FAIL

We were giving students a really good map that showed them all the amazing tools that were available, but that map didn't have any waypoints. Students didn't know where they were supposed to go. A map without any waypoints or without a destination doesn't do you a whole lot of good. You don't get a lot of benefit from having this beautiful map if you don't know where that map is supposed to guide you.

I've been a lifelong video gamer and early video games that first came out with maps did exactly this. They'd give you this great world map and you could see everywhere you could go, but they wouldn't tell you where you were supposed to go or what you were supposed to do. In the video game world that's a lot of fun. You discover and you talk to people and you figure out what you're supposed to do. But in your higher education experience it's a little less fun.

I realized that while I was in school I found out where I was supposed to go from interacting with other people. Whether it was other students, my peers, advisors or going to the administration building, those people were telling me where I needed to go and then I could use the map to get there. These days we've gotten so focused on self service that we've started using technology, and specifically ed tech, to replace interactions instead of facilitating the right kind of interaction.

That works really great for the right kind of student, if you're a very self service kind of person. If you're a person like me who goes through the self checkout every time you go shopping then this self service is very beneficial to you and it does what you need it to. But if you go through the self checkout enough, every once and awhile you come up with an item that won't scan. If that person's not standing at the end of self checkout to help you, you've probably never felt more hopeless than that moment when all of this self service technology fails you and now you don't know where to go or what to do. Our students are ending up in this situation a lot.

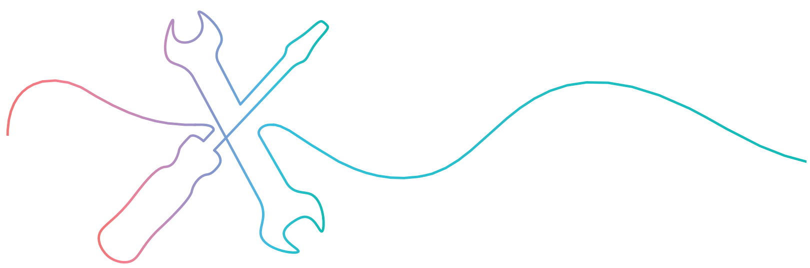
The technology works great when it's working great and when it's doing everything it's supposed to do, but as soon as it fails, they need a community to fall back on, they need people to ask questions to.

That could be peers, it could be advisors, staff, teachers, it could be anybody, but they need that help so that they don't get stuck.

Ed tech built cool tools that we've become dependent upon. We feel like they take care of our problems and we can solve problems with tools.

But tools don't solve problems. Tools HELP you solve problems.

If you have a process problem, a tool is not going to solve that process problem. If you have a community problem, a tool is not going to solve that community problem. It can be a really important asset in how you solve it, but they aren't magic bullets. They're not silver bullets that you drop in and it fixes everything because you've installed this piece of software. We've come to rely on tools and moved away from community.



THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNITY

At Pathify, we started thinking about what comes next after the portal? Where do we go? How do we get away from this link farm, or this map with no waypoints? So we released the Engagement Hub. The Engagement Hub serves a lot of purposes and it does a lot of things, but most importantly it helps build community. Once you have people there, how do you turn that into a community hub? How does it become the new south mall or the quad or the student union so that people interact with each other and learn from each other? And why do I think community is a really important thing to focus on in ed tech?

From recent research I worked on, the feeling of community and interactions in the classroom and outside of the classroom is one of the best success predictors that we found. We were doing machine learning and trying to let the machine deduce the top risk factors of student success. Typically you'd think of performance or mastery of concepts or attendance as the real key indicators of risk. But our machine kept saying that students who were engaging with each other or the instructor or with systems were the folks who were doing really well. When you saw engagement failing, that was a predictor that a student was going to drop a class or drop out of the institution.

We watched over the course of a semester and kept seeing patterns develop where a student would reach out through threaded discussions in the LMS or email or direct messaging to the instructor. They would reach out and no response would come back. And they would reach out and no response would come back. You'd see three or four of these outreaches with no responses and their engagement tracker would get smaller and smaller and move further away and that student would eventually just pop right out the door. They would disappear, they would fail the class, they would drop the class, they wouldn't come back the next semester. This became one of the best risk predictors. We saw remarkable retention lift by looking at those students, not just focusing on academics or attendance or those traditional factors.

I started doing exit interviews for students who were dropping. A common thread came up where they weren't struggling academically, they were attending their classes, they were doing the things that you expect them to do, so risk models weren't picking them up because those are your traditional risk factors. They looked like they were totally fine. They were high performing students, but they were dropping.

When I interviewed them, I heard the same things over and over again:

- "I was struggling and I felt like I was alone."
- "Nobody was helping me."
- "I didn't know who to reach out to."
- "I didn't know where to go. I didn't know what to do."

And so they dropped.

If that student had someone who could help them get through a bad week or two, they could get over that hump. It would turn them around and keep them in that class and maybe they'd graduate from that university. That two weeks of having community support would have fundamentally changed that student's life.

We brought these students back by building community and by just having someone reach out to them and have a conversation.

WHAT COMMUNITY LOOKS LIKE

You have to think about community from day one and build community at the beginning because by the time a student needs that community it's too late. You may have services, you may have counselors, you may have advisors, you may have TAs who will reach out, you may have all of these people who can help in different ways, but when a student's in a time of crisis, they're going to lean on the support community they already know, the people they trust, the people they're aware of. Some students with a certain personality will reach out and look for assistance, but too many of them only reach out to people they trust. If you haven't fostered that community before the time when they need it, it's too late to build it.

During my research we ran a lot of experiments. We'd have the instructor reach out and try to pull them back in. We'd have a TA reach out and try to bring them back in. And we'd have one of the best students in the class reach out and try to bring them back into the conversation. The success rate was almost double if a student did it.

Students respond to students. They respond to their peers. They respond to somebody who's going through the same thing they're going through — they really understand and can help bring those students back in. When we're building community we always want to think about peers. Having peers in the community is very important.

If you think about that student who's struggling and how that sense of community helps them feel like they're part of the school, they become a more engaged alumni later. It also has the exact same effect on the person who's doing the helping. The person who's reaching out and responding and helping lift that person up, they feel like they're part of the institution as well. The tide raises all boats, everybody is highly engaged. So there's lots of reasons to focus on building community.

HOW TO (RE)BUILD COMMUNITY

If we agree that community has gone away a little bit in the world we live in and that we want to bring it back, we can talk about a few ways to build community.

Start Early

Pathify just launched a Prospects portal. Prospective students come in and join the community by logging into the same system your students use. You can segment them away from your students with permissions, but you can also make a certain group of students your prospect ambassadors and give them access to talk to prospects. This way prospects can ask questions of current students — back to that idea that peers have the most impact.

These prospects feel like part of the community from day one. If they're admitted, they bring that community with them. Other prospects they talked to on the prospect portal are their connections when they become freshman. Someone who just went through the same process, advisors who helped them, alumni who helped them, that community comes with them. In the really core first couple of semesters, they've got a prebuilt community because you started it when they were prospects.

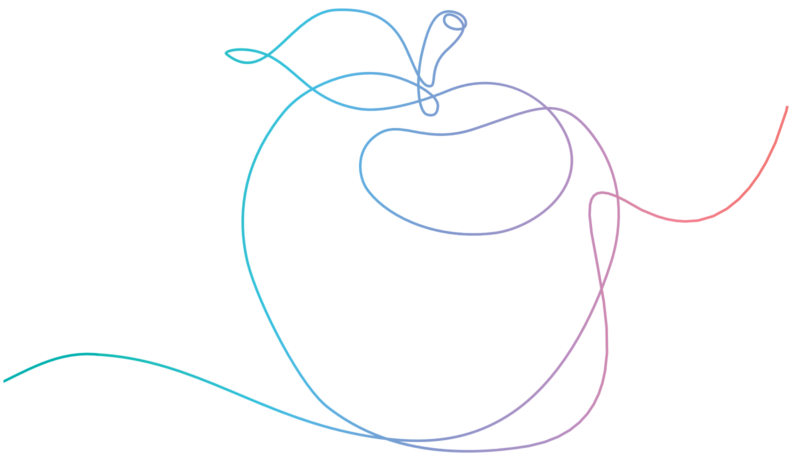
Focus on Student Needs

Always focus on student needs. You have this community hub, it's a great place, it's the student union, everybody can come hang out and talk and collaborate with each other. But if students don't go there, you're not able to build a community there. Your first goal should be to get eyes on the platform, bring people in and have them engage in some way.

I was reading John Green's latest book "The Anthropocene Reviewed," which is fantastic. He talks about how since humans came to dominance, by far the highest predictor of a species' success is how useful they are to humans.

If a species is useful to humans, that species is going to survive. If you can't be useful to humans, your second best survival mechanism is to be cute. If humans think you're cute, you're probably not going to go extinct either. These apply directly to the success of software in your institution as well. You need to either be useful to your students or you need to be really cute. If you can be both, all the better.

When I interview students and ask what's important, they say, "My grades, my money and my food. Those are the things I care about the most." So being able to see my upcoming assignments, the recent grades I've gotten, my GPA, what classes I need to take so that I graduate on time, modeling to show what I need to get on my midterm to keep a B in this class — those things are critical, they need to be there. They're not building community inherently, but they're bringing people to the platform so you can leverage that platform for community. Dining menus is one of the most high engagement widgets we've ever built. If you're telling students what's in the cafeteria that day, they're going to go look everyday. If you can find things that deal with grades, money or food, you can bring people to your platform. Then once you get them to your platform you can leverage them as part of the community.



Keep it Novel

Another way to bring people back to the platform is thinking about novelty. There was a book a few years back called "Hooked." It's a great book but scary in a lot of ways because it talks about how you build products that people basically become addicted to. It's ideology and psychology you can use for evil or for good. Fundamentally, it teaches you that there's three pieces to building this cycle to get someone hooked — a trigger, action and reward. Something happens that makes you want to take an action and when you take that action you get rewarded. As long as that happens over and over again you're going to be ingrained and you're going to use this product over and over again.

In a lot of our cases, the trigger is a notification. You're notified that there's a new message, there's something new in this group you participate in, someone posted something new that you might want to see. Your action is to go to the platform and look at it and your reward is you're seeing something good. This is what Facebook does better than anyone else. Every time you open Facebook you see something new — one of your friends posted something, you see a memory from 10 years ago. You're getting an endorphin release basically by going and looking. If your primary student platform only has things like current courses, get your transcript, things that change once a semester, students aren't going to come back and engage in that platform. It may link to good tools or have stuff they need once a semester, but they're not getting that reward. One of the primary ways to deliver that reward is UGC — user generated content.

Don't be afraid to let your students create content on the platform. A lot of people shy away from it, but any platform that does this well allows for moderation. Students can suggest groups and you can approve them or reject them. You can even do it at the post level, giving you control of which posts stay on the platform and which ones are removed. But letting students create content is a really important part of their ownership.

Multi-Level Communication

Another important thing to think about when you're building community is synchronous versus asynchronous communication. Threaded discussions are very asynchronous — I post something today, you respond tomorrow, I respond next week. We're having a conversation, but it's not in real time. There's a very different feel to a real time conversation versus an asynchronous conversation.

They're both important and you want to support both. Look for tools that support both asynchronous and synchronous communication because being able to communicate in real time is a critical part of building a strong community. It's fundamentally different and people don't think about that enough.

Nudge Them

We do all this work and get people on the platform, we even have groups and communities people can join. But students don't typically dig in and find those things on their own — which is the fundamental problem with traditional student portals. You need to give them some pushes to get them there. You need to give them some wayfinders.

Technology can help. Ed tech can absolutely come in and say "people like you" or "people in your community" or "tell us what your likes are on your profile" and make group or community recommendations. That's really effective.

Malcolm Gladwell has a book called "Tipping Point" where he talks about the law of the few. He says that once a product or service gets the right 20% of people engaged, the other 80% follow along. You just need to know those trend setters. Identify the people on your campus that you want to be your advocates and be your evangelists for these community platforms. Once those people are there and are advocating for it, everybody comes on and joins the platform.

BRINGING IT ALL TOGETHER

The tool and the platform that supports communities are great and necessary, but they don't solve the problem by themselves. You need advocates and content that brings people to the platform. Never think about it as just a tool solution. Think about how you use the tool and how you leverage it and how you get people there. That's the key to rebuilding communities in higher ed today. ■

To learn more, watch Brian's talk from

SXSW 2022

Building Community in a Digital World

Watch the Video

Letter from the CEO

Something to Think About

At Pathify we like to say we're not just a technology company. Focusing on end users — especially students — is the foundation of everything we do. I think that's the underlying thread of this issue. From overtly student-focused initiatives like emphasizing good mental health to underpinning projects like digital transformation, at the end of the day it's all about creating a positive, helpful and elegant user experience.

Everyone knows user experience is important (or at least they should). But it's one of those things that's easy to talk about and more complex when you actually dig into it. Breaking it apart, "users" and "experience" are mammoth concepts on their own, and they're equally important.

We often define users as the people we serve. But who are those people? What do they need? What do they care about? Are we treating them like individuals or a faceless group of anonymous "users"? This is particularly important in higher ed.

Students, alumni, prospective students, faculty, staff and administrators are all specifically unique users, each with their own set of nuanced needs.

But even those groups are too generalized when you're really thinking about users. Users are individuals, and we should never forget that.

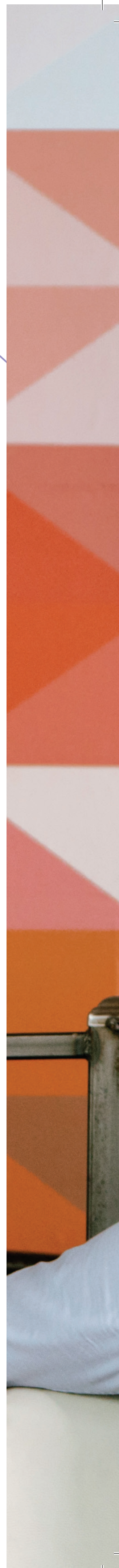
The experience is what you offer them, and it should be heavily influenced by your users. The answer to the question "What do they need and what do they care about?" should form the foundation of the experience. What does the experience offer? How does it flow? Is it intuitive and helpful to the user? These are the things that matter most. It shouldn't just be an experience, it should be a great experience tailored to user needs.

So as you're thinking about these articles, or any other issue you're facing at your institution, I urge you to take a moment and really focus on the users and the experience before you dive into the user experience. In the end, that's what really matters.

Cheers!

Chase Williams

Chase Williams
CEO



James McCubbin (left)
and Chase Williams (right),
founders of Pathify

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