

Pathify

MAGAZINE

FALL 2022



HOW CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY
BUILDS CONNECTEDNESS
BETWEEN STUDENTS AND STAFF

INCLUSIVITY
ON CAMPUS

THE NEW DIGITAL
ECOSYSTEM OF HIGHER ED

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Letter from the Editor

Engagement from Cradle to Grave

The traditional student journey underwent a dramatic shift in recent years. We're used to thinking of the student lifecycle as a consistent pathway leading from prospect to admitted student to current student, ultimately "ending" with alumnus.

As a matter of course in higher education, schools rely on the website as the marketing engine for prospective students while focusing their portal experience towards serving current students.

Today, this strategy is outdated.

It's not only the case that institutions need a cohesive strategy from "cradle to grave," but the student journey that once was so linear is now a lot more...complicated. With the emergence of gap-year programs, new trends spurred by first-generation students, and the increasing popularity of continuing education, the student journey becomes highly complex.

And institutions must adjust accordingly. Creating an environment that only serves the two- or four-year student population will ultimately deter a sizable and important population of students that will help institutions remain solvent for generations to come.

This fall, Pathify Magazine discusses many of the themes critical to attracting and retaining both traditional and non-traditional students. We highlight industry leaders who create inclusive environments for all, seeking to (and succeeding in) creating value for students at every stage of their journey. We explore the pandemic induced "crisis" in higher ed tech brought by the proliferation of technology students must navigate each day in order to stay ahead. And maybe my favorite — you'll hear from a non-traditional student whose unique perspective shines a bright light on challenges our company works to solve each and every day.

I hope you enjoy the work we put in telling some of the many compelling stories of institutions leading the charge as higher education continues to evolve.

I know I did.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Adam Miller".

Adam Miller
Editor, Pathify Magazine

Letter from a Student

Dear Higher Ed Admin,

In some ways, the start of my collegiate career didn't stack up how I thought it would. Not in a bad way. Don't get me wrong, it's just that there were some things I imagined would play out differently. I am what they call a "commuter student." We don't seem to get much recognition, but being a commuter student isn't all that bad. I'd like to share my experiences, good, bad and ugly, so you can get a better idea of who we are.

Being a commuter student is awkward. Here are some examples why: You sometimes have long gaps in your schedule. There is not enough time to go home and you don't have the luxury of going back to your dorm room to do work. Where do you go? Any available space that you can stay in without feeling like you're intruding, while also avoiding weather conditions.

You miss out on what I call, "Student Nightlife." Most classes end around 5 p.m., then the hall events or student run activities commence. But rush hour hits the hardest then and the possibility of an accident adds another 45 minutes to an hour to your commute. This leaves commuters with a tough choice: do we try to beat traffic or stay for an event and risk leaving while there's heavy traffic? (I think it's a no brainer).

Most colleges put on events to entertain on-campus students. Commuter students take on that responsibility for themselves. We have to plan for jobs off campus, travel time, extracurriculars, hangouts and family time.

When you're thinking about how to make your campus more unified, think about commuters. Chances are they feel the most out of place. Put yourself in their shoes and see how you can make them feel more comfortable on campus. Taking small steps towards making commuters feel included will go a long way towards bringing your campus together.

Good luck and on behalf of commuters, thanks.



Dae Lopez

Dae Lopez

Concordia University Irvine
Class of 2023



How Concordia University Builds Connectedness Between Students and Staff



Jessica James

Assistant Director of Orientation
and Student Activities

It's easy to look at today's higher education technology challenges and adopt a position of complacency. They are many. They are hard. And they require resources. However, for Jessica James, Assistant Director of Orientation and Student Activities at Concordia University Irvine, the new landscape is an opportunity for her institution to double-down on what it does best: building relationships with students.

As an institution just shy of 2,000 undergraduate students, creating personalized experiences for students is a top priority. That includes having good communication between students and staff.

"When our students are coming to college, they are leaving their biggest support system," James said. "So the people that have been with them, whether that's a parent, great grandparent or just their family and friends, they are leaving everything that is familiar to them."

For many students, making the jump from high school to college can feel daunting — both academically and socially. Therefore, providing opportunities for students and staff to relate on a personal level helps break down barriers and creates closeness that helps Concordia differentiate itself from other institutions.

"Concordia is inherently a relational school," James said. "Ninety-five percent of the time I ask students why they came to Concordia and they say it's because of the community and connectedness."

Concordia is the type of institution that promotes camaraderie and friendly competition through a series of events and school spirit initiatives, such as Prey Day. In addition, because it prides itself on its connection to the Lutheran church, having students and staff that share the same faith creates a natural connection.

There are two key locations for student and staff to connect — the cafeteria and coffee shop both centrally located on campus. Both are common watering holes for students and staff to connect in a more casual setting outside the classroom and interact beyond the traditional professor-student relationship.

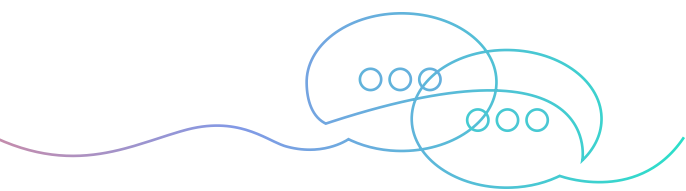
"Those moments create humanity and that specialness that we feel here at Concordia because we are a small institution so the more that you can relate to people on a not purely academic level, the smoother the transition becomes for a lot of students," James said.



MEETING STUDENTS WHERE THEY ARE

Like many other institutions, Concordia is welcoming an increasing number of Gen Z students. Unlike the previous generation, Gen Z grew up entirely on social media and is accustomed to interacting with peers primarily through various digital touchpoints.

In fact, a recent Pew Research Center study states 46% of teenagers say they constantly use the internet, and college students are no exception. But as any administrator will notice, more time online creates increased anxiousness when it comes to in-person interactions. James said this often manifests itself when it comes time to have difficult conversations.



She notes that today's students don't respond well to pointed criticism and often avoid in-person meetings. Concordia trains its staff on giving more constructive feedback to help students feel more comfortable opening up.

"It's not just like 'okay you messed up you're in trouble,' it's 'okay you messed up, how can we be better next time?' Using those opportunities that could be punishment as a way to talk them through it," James said. "You have to have hard conversations, but in the process, we're also explaining the process and rules we have, why we have these guidelines and talking through some of those lapses in judgment."

Concordia prides itself in working hand-in-hand with students in helping them gain valuable life skills from a professional and social standpoint to prepare them for post-graduation. When it comes to tough conversations, it's less about what the student did and more about how to apply what they learned from that conversation moving forward.

James notes those moments as some of her highlights working for Concordia.

"My favorite conversations that I get to have are when you give them that space to prove that they are better than this one instance," James said. "I've had a couple instances where we didn't get off on the right foot and had some awkward interactions, but I'm going to believe the best in them and I believe they're going to beat that expectation. When they do, that's really cool."

EMBRACING THE INDIVIDUALITY OF SOCIAL NATIVES

Although Concordia likes to emphasize the importance of in-person interactions with its students, its staff also know this generation wants to be true to who they are. For students, that undoubtedly means expressing themselves and communicating over social media.

By and large, Gen Z strongly prefers messaging over social apps like TikTok, Snapchat and Instagram over traditional text messaging and email. Concordia aims to provide a similar platform while also keeping appropriate boundaries between students and staff.

To reach this objective, Concordia enlisted Pathify's help to build a student portal that creates a personalized, social experience with all relevant information in one place.

"We have really excellent leadership where our Dean of Students is constantly asking the question of what is best for the students," James said. "It's at the forefront of our mind and that question gives us permission to make changes."

Concordia was drawn to Pathify because it spans both academics and students' social lives. Their new MyCUI app became a digital representation of their entire institutional experience — and a popular way to stay engaged.

Instead of just moving existing features to Pathify, Concordia focused on innovative use cases students find particularly useful. The institution also took extra steps to include important information students need. Now, instead of hopping between systems and websites, users execute a simple search within the Pathify Engagement Hub that returns results customized to their personal user persona.



One example includes creating suggested groups for students to join based on their interests. Rather than waiting for students to communicate what they needed, the suggested groups feature allowed Concordia to take a more proactive approach in helping students join communities that are meaningful to them.

"Our Dean had this idea that instead of waiting for the students to come to us, we should figure out what they are involved in and let's go to where they are," James explained. "We list a bunch of student interests like anything from hiking, baking, Disney, you name it, and allow them to pick and choose to say 'here's who I am as a person.'"

Events are another area where Concordia allows its brand to shine through. Faculty and staff look at the various events on campus and attend ones their students organize to show support and build community.

"It really does lead to good connections that can happen outside of the classroom," James said.

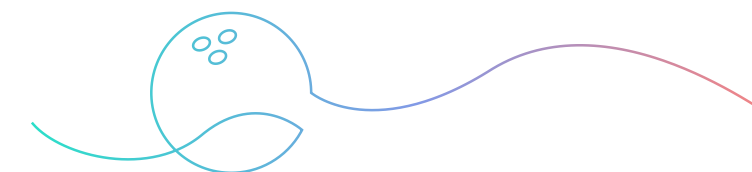
"LIKE BUMPERS IN A BOWLING LANE"

Concordia's approach to student affairs is simple. Give students the freedom to push themselves while fostering a supportive environment to keep them from falling down.

James recalled a recent example of how Concordia strikes this balance in a way that only an institution of its size can offer.

"I think of one student, in particular, that wanted to double major and be involved really heavily in student leadership," James said. "Along the way people say 'that's going to be really hard. I don't know if you can do that' and she said, 'watch me' and figured it out while we supported her along the way."

James said it's stories like these that make her proud to work at Concordia. It allows her to support students in pursuing their academic goals with all the right resources to keep them on track.



"I think of myself like the bumpers on the bowling lane where they are the ones pushing the bowling ball to the finish line, but I'm just there to be sure that they don't rip off the track," James said. "That should be our job as student affairs professionals."

WHAT INSTITUTIONS CAN LEARN FROM CONCORDIA

At many institutions, upgrading technology to meet student needs is challenging. The mantra that “we’ve always done things that way,” is the standard response even when bold and innovative leaders recognize a need for thinking differently.

James identifies with the struggles other institutions face, but encourages those trying to bring a better sense of community to not give up and recognize that change doesn’t happen overnight.

“You have to be patient,” James said. “You need to be constantly asking and questioning if everything you’re doing is leading the school towards more connections.”

The first step to driving change is understanding the type of student coming to campus. It’s easy to forget that while faculty and staff get older every year, students stay the same age. That means interests and needs change frequently as the technology students get their hands on gets smarter.

What worked five years ago won’t work today. According to James, administrators need to be aware of what’s trending for prospective students when making any type of decision.

But driving change is only half the battle. Even when an institution’s leadership agrees it’s time to improve technology, it typically results in a disjointed effort where some champion the change while others stick to the old state of affairs.

The key to making technology adoption work across campus, according to James, is to find internal champions who will drive a shift in culture among faculty and staff. Once there’s widespread buy-in, students will eventually adopt the technology as well.

“Your culture is going to drive the behavior of your institution,” James said. “If your culture buys into that connection, that is going to drive behavior to lead towards that goal of total adoption.”

Part of driving adoption involves having persistence throughout the process. However, what’s equally important to James is that if new technology isn’t working, institutions should pivot to another course of action.

However, what they shouldn’t do is be stubborn and keep trying to make something that doesn’t

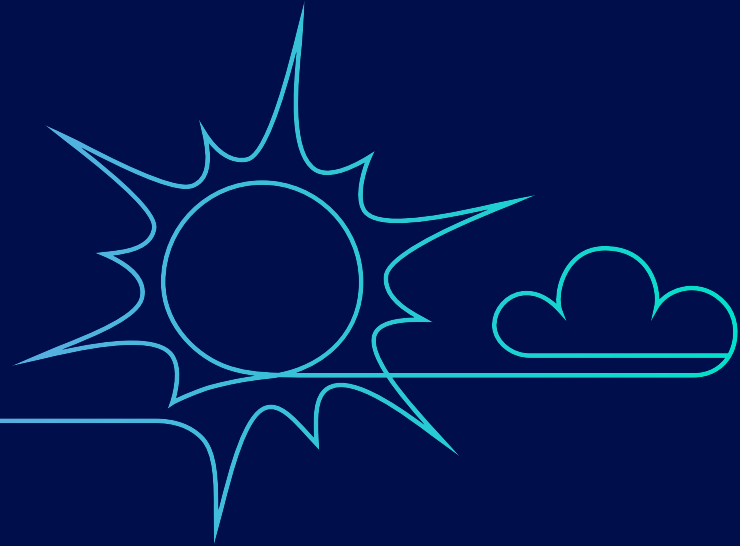
work stick just because an institution invested in that technology.

“Our Dean likes to give things three tries before making a decision,” James said. “One time you’re going to try it. The second time you’re going to refine it and then if it still doesn’t work, now we try something new, but you have to take action.”

Regardless of the outcome, having a bias towards experimentation and a willingness to create community is what’s going to help institutions stand out from the competition. James recognizes Concordia will never offer what big state schools have to offer, and that’s okay.

Like many Gen Z students, as long as Concordia stays true to its identity, the right students will always find a home on campus. ■





Inclusivity on Campus



Creating an Inclusive Environment
for Aggie Family at Utah State

Embracing a DEI Strategy at
Winston-Salem State University



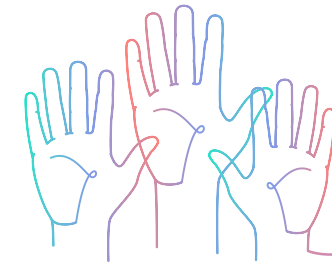
Creating an Inclusive Environment for Aggie Family at Utah State



Rene Eborn
Deputy of Digital
Transformation &
Associate Vice President
of Strategic Initiatives



Mykel Beorchia
Executive Director
University and
Exploratory Advising



"Aggie Think Care Act is foundational for us because our principles of community focuses on diversity, human dignity and social responsibility," said Mykel Beorchia, Executive Director of University and Exploratory Advising.

Beorchia believes reaching those principles requires a holistic, community approach, with employees providing students the same environment they strive to work in. Of course, before staff can create an inclusive environment for students, it starts with becoming a place where faculty and staff want to come to work.

Earlier this year, the institution hired Jane Irungu as its first vice president for diversity, equity and inclusion. She's tasked with creating guiding practices and opportunities to promote "access and cultural proficiency" not only for students, but also faculty and staff.

Jane Irungu
Vice President
of Diversity, Equity
& Inclusion



"You can't possibly ask students to engage in an inclusive environment if you're not feeling that it's inclusive for you," Beorchia said of USU's inclusiveness efforts.

The retention battle continues for nearly every institution across the country. If the last few years are any indication, it will get increasingly difficult to retain students weighing both traditional and non-traditional options for education. And the pool of potential undergraduate students continues to shrink.

Rene Eborn, deputy of digital transformation and associate vice president of strategic initiatives at Utah State University, believes one of the answers to solving retention in higher education involves creating a more inclusive campus. Doing so helps create a greater sense of community and connectedness.

"It's really important to have inclusive campuses because they promote a strong sense of well-being and help students feel safe," Eborn said. "Therefore, it helps increase the overall success of students."

Utah State champions a number of initiatives promoting the care and thoughtfulness it wants students to sense across campus. One of those initiatives called "Aggie Think Care Act," is meant to elevate the academic experience for all USU students. It's an initiative that provides support for individuals who are victims of bias, racism, harassment or microaggressions and calls on students to create an environment of acceptance, respect and empowerment.

Aggie Think Care Act provides students with the inclusive, welcoming environment USU wants to promote on campus. It's an initiative that starts at the top, with all staff members owning inclusivity so every student senses the institution's core values.

MAKING STUDENTS THE MAIN CHARACTER

Creating an inclusive student experience requires student services professionals to let students play the main character in advising appointments. Beorchia believes rather than trying to fit the student into a box based on industry best practices, advisors need to be active listeners and focus on what's best for the student individually.



The more students are at the center of the meeting, the more likely it is they will agree on a plan that best sets the student up for success based on their unique situation. Taking this approach requires being completely open and clear of any preconceived notions.

"It's really easy for us to put students as a side character because they're not us," Beorchia said. "They're not the main character of our story."

In practice, this means asking more experienced-based questions rather than skill-based questions, helping students find the right path for their student journey. For example, rather than asking about a student's strengths and weaknesses, the advisor instead asks about a moment in high school that made them proud.

"Some of our students really haven't been asked great questions," Beorchia said. "If I can hear actual stories from students' lives, that opens up possibilities for me to make really great referrals in the advising experience that are centered on who the student is and what they want to achieve."

This type of advising helps students get the guidance they need to find success while at Utah State, whether they're first-generation students, come from a lower income family or have unique accessibility requirements. In addition, USU students have the option to take a two-credit course called "Campus Connections," which helps first-year students ease into college by finding their purpose at the institution while developing a healthy mindset and feeling a sense of belonging in their early days on campus.

USU's personalized support system extends to their student portal — known as MyUSU. It provides all the online tools and resources a student needs and allows them to join affinity groups that match their interests while creating connections with other students.

"Personalization is really important to us because we want them to feel like they're part of the Aggie family, even when they're in their room or on their phone," Eborn said.

HOW USU SHEPHERDS AGGIES REGARDLESS OF BACKGROUND

First-generation students at times have unique challenges, like needing extra help filling out the proper paperwork to get started on campus, and additional guidance to help them through the student lifecycle.

Utah State hits this challenge head-on with its Aggie First Scholars (AFS) program, which gives first-generation students a framework to build the skills and receive resources that help them succeed academically. First-generation students have the option to take two one-credit classes titled, "Habits of Mind for AFS" and "Applied Leadership and Skills."

"AFS is designed to provide every first-generation student the opportunity to recognize the power within them to accomplish their goals at USU," said Heidi Kesler, Director of Student Retention and Completion, Student Support Services. "It also seeks to unpack the hidden curriculum at the core of higher education, thereby giving students access to all that the university offers. Peer and faculty mentors are available for students who choose to maximize their university experience and expand their learning community."

These courses help first-generation students identify relevant communities while finding their strengths through guided coaching. They also provide structured mentoring plans designed to help them become competitive applicants for student employment — and beyond graduation.

As Eborn explained, the courses and guidance are less about applying a certain framework to students and more about helping students get the personalized support they need. This coaching doesn't just extend to first generation students, but also includes low income students, adult learners and many other types of non-traditional students.

What's important isn't the type of student they are, but instead what they need. It's about meeting them where they are.

"There are always best practices that provide a lens for dealing with a specific student," Eborn said. "But then you adapt it so those students truly get a personal response, along with the advice and help they need."

While success in the classroom is important, USU understands job placement and post-graduate student success matter more today than ever before. Beorchia says Utah State is well-equipped to help Aggies of all backgrounds thrive post graduation.

"We want all of our students to achieve the biggest dream that they can imagine, and even a dream they can't imagine," Beorchia said. "In advising, we're helping students open as many doors as possible, and maybe ones they haven't seen yet."

When she has a chance to make an introduction that may help the student land an internship or a job, Beorchia doesn't just suggest they reach out. Instead, the advisor makes an introduction on the student's behalf and provides ample detail to the faculty member, setting the relationship up for success.

Other times she'll connect the student with an alum from their major to network for potential employment opportunities. What ultimately makes effective connections from a career services perspective is a sense of community and care in the Aggie family.

Alums frequently go back to USU to recruit students in their industries as a way to give back. This is especially useful for students who seek jobs outside Utah and want to make connections.

"It all rolls up to being part of the Aggie family, and people take it very seriously," Eborn said.



TIPS FOR CREATING AN INCLUSIVE ENVIRONMENT

With so many competing agendas across campus, it's at times difficult to implement truly inclusive policies that welcome every student on campus. But Eborn believes working cross-functionally across campus is key in making all students feel welcome.

There are five areas where institutions should commit in order to achieve an inclusive environment on campus.

Take a readiness assessment

Before diving into any type of DEI initiative, Eborn believes it's important to survey the campus to see where the culture currently stands and assess what improvements need to be made.

Have or hire a strong sponsor for DEI

Utah State has long had a desire to improve inclusiveness efforts on campus.

But until Irungu's hire, its staff didn't have a consistent internal champion to help move the institution forward. Her presence allows her to suggest areas of improvement and help drive change forward.

"We're reorganizing some staff and resources under her so she has the resources to create a more equitable environment," Eborn said.

Bring in a variety of stakeholders

Any campus-wide initiative will impact departments differently. If an institution wants to admit students from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds, that requires financial aid to create packages that entice students to enroll. This is just one example of how a seemingly small tweak in DEI strategy creates a ripple effect across campus.

To help drive change, all departments need to have an idea of where an institution's priorities are and reach consensus through collaboration.

"You need an inclusive stakeholder planning team that has advocates from each department," Eborn said. "You can't make changes without the support and buy-in of all the different groups involved."

Deploy a team to help roll out initiatives

As important as it is to achieve buy-in, it's even more important to have a team making the initiatives happen. Driving inclusiveness shouldn't be siloed to a singular person or team. It needs to be a joint effort with cross-campus collaboration.

The team doesn't require making all new hires, but instead should be a team of internal champions working together to ensure the institution creates an inclusive environment.

Educate yourself on DEI

Like anything else, before implementing a new policy, Eborn suggests learning about the different aspects of DEI. There are many

instances where staff show bias without realizing it. Educating staff on how to identify unconscious biases helps improve their awareness of blind spots as it relates to DEI, while also getting the training needed to be a better advocate.

Providing an inclusive environment should be attainable for any institution. It starts with a desire for community and for all students to have an equitable education. If staff and faculty members work to solve problems on campus together, the institution will likely foster the environment students need to thrive on campus.

"We're asking our professionals to bring the best of what they have, so that we can solve the problems that we have now, and make the learning environment meet the needs of our students," Eborn said. ■





Embracing a DEI Strategy at Winston-Salem State University



Raisha Cobb
Associate Provost and
Chief Information Officer



WINSTON-SALEM
STATE UNIVERSITY

There’s a famous story from Winston-Salem State University’s inception Associate Provost and Chief Information Officer Raisha Cobb believes encompasses her institution’s mission. When Simon Green Atkins founded WSSU in 1892, someone asked him “why build a school for Negroes?...what are you going to teach them?”

Atkins responded, “What do they teach at Harvard? And what do they teach at the world’s great universities?”

In many ways, that exchange encompasses the inclusive mindset at Winston-Salem. Although the institution is part of the HBCU (Historically Black Colleges and Universities) system, its staff welcomes students of all races and prioritizes collective student success.

If there’s any institution equipped to help minority students thrive in the workforce, it’s Winston-Salem. Thanks to an HBCU grant from the Department of Education, WSSU possesses the necessary resources to increase African American and low socioeconomic status students’ participation in STEM fields including nursing, healthcare management, computer science and many more.

According to Cobb, the mission of academia is to make good citizens while building the intellectual capacity to thrive in society. Meeting that mission means focusing less on elitism at the institutional level — and more on equity.

“We have to meet people where they’re at and help them have a seat at the table,” Cobb said. “We need to make sure they have the skills and tools needed in order to be successful.”

One of the biggest misconceptions in conversations around Diversity, Equity and Inclusion initiatives is that getting that seat at the table means making personal sacrifices or losing out on opportunities.

“That’s where we see barriers to inclusivity,” Cobb said. “It’s the notion that I have to give up something in order for you to have a seat at the table, and that’s really not the case.”

Instead, she suggests the mindset should be working together as a team to accomplish more for an organization. Placing an emphasis on DEI combines different perspectives and experiences while bringing together the best collection of skills.

WSSU’s own HR strategy believes in building a workforce that helps students of all backgrounds and ideologies thrive, while also creating an environment that motivates staff to feel like they’re pulling towards a common goal. Today, DEI isn’t just a belief; it permeates everything Winston-Salem does for its faculty and students.

MAKING DEI A STRATEGY

Over the past three years, Winston-Salem tasked itself with creating a more strategic DEI plan, encouraging faculty and staff to get more certifications. That training created an awareness of opportunities for improvement.

From a hiring perspective, Cobb said the institution looked at itself critically to determine how to drive a more diverse applicant pool while ensuring equitable representation when identifying qualified candidates and hires.

Part of expanding the candidate pool includes embracing a variety of beliefs and faiths without attaching stigma.



"I try to look at it as here's a job I have that needs to be done," Cobb said. "Do you have the skillset to complete it? If you're able to do the job, I think you should have a fair opportunity to interview."

One of the biggest misconceptions when it comes to DEI is that it's not just about bringing together people of different backgrounds — it's about truly understanding and embracing different lifestyles and practices.

In some cases, this includes allowing employees to take different holidays off. In other cases, it includes increased sensitivity for parents with family obligations, ensuring they take ample leave without feeling like they're missing out. Cobb believes leaders ultimately need to accommodate all types of employee lifestyles to make everyone feel part of an organization.

"Our job as leaders is making sure people have the tools they need in order to be successful, especially if you're being productive and giving back to the organization," Cobb said.

Another critical DEI opportunity is reversing the trend of African American men opting out of enrolling in college nation-wide. That challenge, according to Cobb, is one that WSSU aggressively takes on.

"We have to look at what we can do to help change the momentum by putting in programs and student success activities to address that," Cobb said.

In a 2021 DEI report, WSSU outlined a number of initiatives, including retention efforts around their male population. One program titled "The Male Experience" is a mentoring program meant to provide unwavering brotherhood by promoting personal, academic and professional support.

For first-year students, the institution has "Brother to Brother Barber Shop Talk," a bi-weekly conversation about life, mental health and any barriers hindering young men from being successful. Cobb says programs like these are important for first-generation students who attend their institution.

"We create a safe space where no other students of color will have a majority of people who look like them while finding people who share their interests and lifestyle," Cobb said. "You have a community here."



UNLEASHING THE GENIUS

While Winston-Salem's model for hiring and inclusion practices are a model for higher ed institutions (and corporate America), Cobb knows many recruiting processes will be challenging for her institution's graduates.

WSSU has a high number of first-generation students in attendance who don't have parents that had white-collar careers. As a result, the job placement process is brand new, with students needing help with resumes, interview skills and how to dress for success.

In the past, job-seekers of color were told to blend in with other applicants more by changing their names to make them more race-neutral — even suggesting women should straighten their hair. Today, that's a thing of the past and — Cobb's glad to see it.

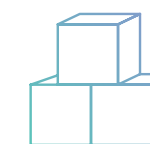
"I hate that some people feel like they can't be who they are in order to move forward in getting a job, or just in life," Cobb said.



Instead, Winston-Salem creates workshops that help students go through the full-cycle of the application process. WSSU focuses on repeated simulation, delivering valuable experience in a safe environment to make job seekers more competitive post-graduation.

Cobb refers to this as "unleashing the genius." It's a belief that embraces authentic expression in whatever ways the student prefers. It's a message that resonates across campus and translates to the work environment when students are the best possible version of themselves, capable of breaking down barriers to success.

"We're working on the building blocks with our students to get them prepared to have a seat at the table, not trying to overshadow who they are. Because who you are is important."



In addition to training, Winston-Salem's initiatives also include partnering with companies on both internship and postgraduate recruiting. These companies specifically seek out HBCU students in order to bring new perspectives to their organization, and are a big reason why WSSU maintains one of the highest-earning graduating classes in the state of North Carolina.

"If you're a global organization, then you want the different perspectives and experiences that you know students can bring," Cobb said.

MORE THAN JUST CHECKING A BOX

DEI has become a major initiative across the country, and there are many stages to implementing a strategy effectively. But what's important for institutions, according to Cobb, is they don't simply check a box and say they're doing DEI, but actually put it into practice on a consistent basis.

It's something that takes continuous effort over the long haul to permanently improve the institution. Cobb advises schools to provide ample opportunities for student expression in safe spaces.

For example, she notes institutions should encourage the formation of affinity groups where students connect with peers with similar interests. This creates community, forging a far deeper connection amongst the student body.

Cobb also recommends enabling leadership, administrators and students to work together, ensuring progress reflects the support and inclusion students desire.

Many institutions have DEI hiring practices in place. That, according to Cobb, is a good start, but it needs to extend to everything an institution does from procurement to curriculum development.

Embracing DEI on campus isn't just about creating an inclusive environment. It's also about having difficult conversations when the time calls for it. Cobb said one of the biggest areas of growth for WSSU occurs when the institution identifies processes that require correction.

However, it's those critiques that ultimately keep an institution accountable and get closer to achieving its DEI goals.

"When we do things that counter what we say we are, I think that's the hardest part about being a leader because you're dealing with criticism," Cobb said. "But it's necessary because it keeps us truthful and honest."

Before creating a DEI strategy, be sure to include

all stakeholders at the table. It not only helps create alignment, but also ensures policies are carried out effectively.

"You need staff and faculty at the table when you're creating these plans," Cobb said. "If not, it's not going to live or become part of the fabric of your organization."

There's no straightforward path toward mastering DEI. But making small, incremental changes goes a long way towards making the campus a more inclusive experience for all.

"I wish there was a perfect formula," Cobb said. "But I think it's ongoing and something that you have to continually invest in. It has to be a priority." ■



Attracting Adult Learners Requires Clear Value Proposition

Chris Hagan
Chief Technology Officer



I am studying for an anatomy exam and the phone is ringing.

I'm ignoring it. Nope, it's my wife. I'll take that. The groceries need to be picked up. Well, there goes the one hour I had this week to study.

My supervisor isn't going to sympathize. She did her training in World War II, and she's doing her doctorate now with two adult children and, by all accounts, the laziest husband in the world. You'd think that would make her sympathetic, but that's not really how a clinical supervisor at a hospital rolls.

The good thing about this type of course is that there are plenty of adults here, looking to upgrade their professional practice from being carers and servers into the more medical part of the hospital's life (and the enhanced paycheck and respect that represents). And we understand each other. They've got kids, too. And weekend shifts, and a healthy amount of panic that they've left all of this too late. Why did we all wait until we had kids? We should have done this while we had the time!

As recession fears grip the nation and mass layoffs seem to be a daily news story, the number of adult learners applying to institutions will only increase. While a return to higher education during a recession is a trend that has existed for decades, the student experience has the potential to be almost entirely different than previous years.

For a start, like it or not, we've had to move our classes online. Institutions started to (and will continue to) advertise continuing education programs to everyone and anyone regardless of location. This rise in asynchronous learning could dramatically improve revenue for institutions, if only they properly catered to the adult student.

The problem is that many deploy the same strategies they use to attract four-year traditional students and expect the same result.

As a former adult learner, a bit of whose story you read above, I'm going to talk about what we need to do to attract adult students and how building a community can create a more attractive environment for this prospect cohort.



FOR ADULT LEARNERS, HIGHER ED IS A PRODUCT

The institution's brand used to be a huge part of attracting prospects to ultimately attend. Your alma mater used to matter. The imprimatur was prominent. But adult students aren't enticed by this.

They're looking for specific value from their certification or advanced degree. Unlike a young four-year student who attends an institution unsure of where their degree will land them, hoping to come out with a plan, a later-in-life learner has a clear picture of why they're attending and what they want from their education. In other words, they view adult education as a product.

The average adult learner knows the career they hope to pursue following their education and probably knows what it will do to their household income. That makes their enrollment an economic gamble. They're betting that if they spend X, they'll be able to earn Y upon graduation.

My wife gave birth to our first child while I studied for my first qualification (and while she studied for hers). I faced serious competition between providing for my family, enhancing my ability to get a better job, and being a father. I had no time, and my university was careless with it. I once drove 60 kilometers to attend an art class whose curriculum turned out to be “play among yourselves!” The undergraduate students didn’t mind, they went for lunch cheering that they had the day off. I raced home.

We need to align cost with value.

“The adult learner does not think of themselves as a malleable student, earnestly hoping to become the best they can become. They are a rational consumer of the institution’s services.”

And since many adult learners are footing the bill as low-income or middle-class earners, institutions need to position themselves as the best option for adults to enhance their options.

SIGNIFICANT BARRIERS TO STUDENT SUPPORT

There is no pressure or expectation for an adult learner to pursue continuing education. If anything, they will face resistance from their social networks and family to move forward with recertifying. “Why would you start all that again?” They become alienated from those peers who have not returned to study.

In addition, they lack a built-in community that allows them to meet with other like-minded students and form real connections. Higher ed is primarily built with the campus as an anchor for the student experience. It’s designed for students who either have the means to live in dorms or don’t mind living on campus. Incidental contact with students and peers of many levels is one of the most important paths to enrichment, whether it be at the lunch table, in social clubs or simply running into a professor on the grounds.

But for adult learners, most students don’t have a connection beyond the classroom and are otherwise entirely isolated from social interaction. They don’t have time for the clubs, or to hang around on campus.

This lack of social interaction makes us doubt. We ask ourselves whether this investment is worth the challenges we face in and out of the classroom or if we’ve missed our chance. Institutions hoping to attract adult learners in the future must provide a real pathway to incidental contact in addition to in-course collaboration for students to forge authentic connections and bond with like-minded people. Relationships spell retention.

THE WORLD OF ADULT LEARNING IS INTERRUPTIVE

At home, adults face an interruption-based lifestyle where there’s a constant responsibility or distraction preventing them from focusing on their studies. This runs counter to taking classes in higher education, which require immersion.

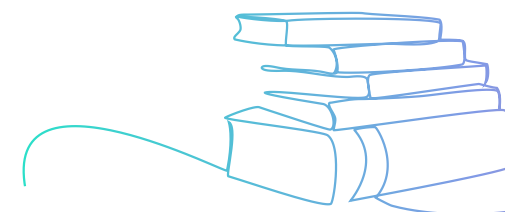
Every five minutes there’s something else to do and a student can’t easily get immersed in the material they’re supposed to study. This creates a world of anxiety for students who want to show their families that the financial investment was worth it, but can’t focus for any length of time without interruption.

In addition, the technology offered to adult students isn’t conducive for use within the flow of their day.

When I was an undergraduate student, I lounged around campus waiting to sign up for classes, get my grades or seek out any other relevant information that mattered to my higher education experience. Efficiency wasn’t important — it all counted as being at school. As an adult learner, I didn’t have time to look for information.

I had work to balance and a baby to deal with. Fishing through a website or portal was the last thing on my mind, if the information was even online.

But many institutions assume that what works for four-year students will work for adult learners and guess what? It doesn’t. Adults don’t have time for red tape. They want to spend time getting the experience necessary to practice what they’re learning professionally rather than digging for information that should be easily available.



RETHINKING THE VALUE PROPOSITION FOR ADULT LEARNERS

Despite an increasing adult learning population, institutions have never been more equipped to meet their demands than the present. Through the presence of online communities, institutions can provide students with more value without raising the cost of tuition.

Online communities connect current students with current practitioners in the field who can discuss their experience and even provide help on how the student can get through their courses. These connections can provide valuable expertise and even help students land relevant internships or jobs post-graduation. Outside of the technicalities, much of what my study gave me was contact with current, expert practitioners. I saw what they valued, and how they talked. The things they joked about, and the way they held their lives lightly. This wasn’t in a textbook; nurses get funnier the worse things get! Also, I learned that some people have mastered the art of smoking two cigarettes at the same time when their break is only three minutes long.



An online student community can be even better than a physical one, when the community is bigger than just taking the same course. For example, an institution can create a community for parents with infants or learners taking care of elderly parents. This type of connection allows students to bond over common issues that most four-year students don't have, and to feel that the institution is helping to connect them and has concern for their well-being. A student who is introduced to similar learners feels seen.

Contrast these communities with the typical options you see in continuing education programs. Students are either put into groups based on age or the class they're taking. Neither option is adequate for adult students.



LEARNING IN THE FLOW OF LIFE

There isn't much an institution can do to prevent an adult learner from constant interruptions. However, there are ways to make their academic experience a little easier that can and should be implemented.

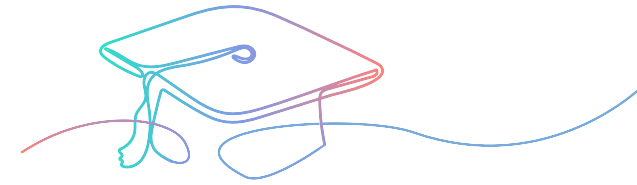
Institutions need to fight for attention from adult students by providing alerts and push notifications to their mobile device. But if it's not carefully judged, it will become an extra stress in and of itself. We must make the information we interject into our students' day clear, relevant and useful.

While a four-year student can spend some time looking for information on deadlines, submitting paperwork and making payments, the adult student is likely to forget these minute details.

Since these learners have scarce free time and are always on the go, institutions must build in critical reminders into any continuing education program they offer.

I like to refer to this as "learning in the flow of life." Similar to the many other apps I have helping to manage my day-to-day life, adult learners are more likely to have a positive experience with an institution if there is technology in place to make finding information smooth and seamless.

Most adult learners aren't interested in the cap and gown experience, but that doesn't make them any less important as a student. If anything, there's no better time than the present to rethink the approach to adult learners. The typical gap and gown approach that made starry-eyed high school students clamor to attend your institution doesn't have the same appeal to adults.



But they need us!

If all a learner needed was access to knowledge, every topic offered through YouTube, Udemy, Coursera and Wikipedia would displace entire courses. But that hasn't happened. People still need the reinforcement, the structure and the support an institution can offer. Otherwise, a school is just an online content provider behind a paywall.

It's time to go beyond the typical learning experience and show adult students that when they write that check to an institution, they receive a clear ROI from their decision. ■



So Many Priorities, So Few Resources

Using Technologies to Create Better Communications and Best Practices

David R. Glezerman

Managing Partner of the DRG Group



With the higher education industry reaching yet another crossroads in its never-ending journey to create knowledge paths, teach expertise and train new generations of students in the skills and instructions to manage their lives, colleges and universities across the spectrum are encountering multiple challenges and dilemmas in how to efficiently manage their campus and online operations, while also creating and guiding a greatly expanded student experience.

While the COVID-19 pandemic has expedited many instructional and operational changes out of necessity — and demonstrated how change does not require extensive use of committees and long periods of time — many other issues and events have arisen to open up new debates and discussions about best practices and new directions.

As the 21st century's "Roaring 20's" progress, higher education institutions must again look to retool how they do business that impacts its current and future students in an environment where academic and administrative needs often clash amid conflicts between affordability, funding, proving educational quality and creating a student success-driven experience.

Higher education also must simultaneously recognize and manage students' concerns in this changing world. Issues such as mental health,

food insecurity and equity are now thrown under the same umbrella as student debt, financing an education, career placement and just trying to have some fun. All of these issues appearing on the radar at this same moment in time have many students and their families asking whether their investment to earn a college degree really provides value.



How can higher education professionals create and maintain the changing culture needed to attract and convert prospects into students, offer a high-quality student experience to retain these individuals, construct a student success-driven environment and graduate their students with such positive feelings about the school that they become active alumni and donors? Let's explore some issues and concerns that higher education institutions must address and resolve so that students and school, alike, can experience mutual benefits and successes.

THE NEXT GENERATIONS OF STUDENTS

Where are the next generations of students coming from? We already know that the demographic models show the traditional prospect pool of 18 to 22-year-olds is shrinking and will continue its downward trend. Community colleges already have identified this, and are recruiting larger numbers of adult learners and individuals desiring retraining as new enrollment and, thus, revenue sources.

Traditional four-year public and private institutions also are shifting direction to compete for these same student populations, as well as working with the community college sector through various agreements that facilitate student transfers from the two-year schools.

Many institutions are resuming and strengthening their initiatives to attract greater numbers of international students back into the United States, in lieu of opening or growing programs in other countries.

Meanwhile, there are rumblings that the traditional higher education model must shift and adjust to a world where employers are more concerned about competencies than degrees. Creating and offering more certificate-based programs that are more competency-based can potentially lead to shorter time frames to complete programs and faster access into new jobs or careers while reducing tuition costs for students — and much less student loan debt.

Rather than sending employees to colleges and universities for training and development, many companies, such as Amazon, are now investigating how they can offer their own educational programs that can be tailored more closely to corporate needs and desired skills. Designing these new programs could greatly reduce the student pool and seriously impact revenues. Small private colleges and some for-profit schools are especially at risk because of their dependence on tuition revenues and sensitivity to enrollment shifts.

As institutions seek out their own formulas to maintain or grow enrollments, how they manage the student experience will be one of their key success factors. Successful prospecting and admissions processes can easily deteriorate, not just through traditional and expected summer melts, but, more importantly, establishing a clear and easy path for students to navigate through their academic “career” and the related administrative processes that are required by reasons tied to both institutional and student finances as well as regulatory compliance.

SETTING EXPECTATIONS

A key element to starting students down the right path to an outstanding experience is setting expectations at the beginning of the journey. How a school communicates with its students (both new and continuing) as well as their families and other related constituents will set the tone of how the institution functions and what’s important to know and do.

Throughout the admissions process, there’s usually an open and easily accessible or navigable path to information. Why not — when you’re wanted and needed, we’ve got to keep it simple. Campus marketing departments focus on clear and concise messaging to bring prospective students on-board to apply. Successful applicants know they are wanted by the school, but don’t necessarily know what the institution wants next.

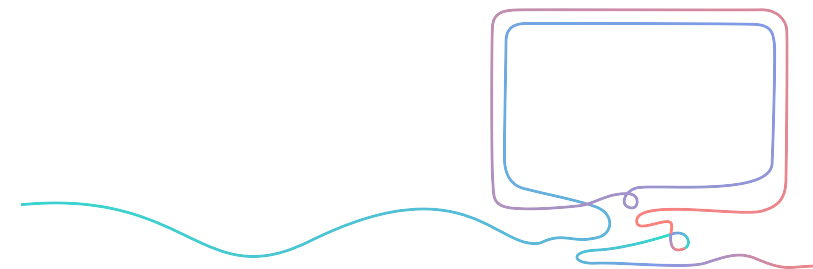
Whether it’s related to academic programs or financial aid, getting on-campus housing or paying one’s bill, institutions must continue to proactively communicate what students need to do and how to get it done. The acceptance letter from Admissions not only sets the congratulatory tone for becoming “one of the family,” it should start to set the expectations for what a student needs, when it’s due and why it’s important.

In more traditional settings, student orientation programs often provide a crucial opportunity to set the direction for student success and a positive experience. Unfortunately, orientation programs try to accommodate every and all needs and wants from a multitude of offices, while simultaneously attempting to set out the path for students’ academic careers. Add in the need to create a “fun” atmosphere for these new community members forces organizers to find the right balance between information, knowledge sharing and enjoyment.

These issues can be exacerbated when working with late admitted or transfer students. Having little or no lead time to share necessary information such as financial aid and billing deadlines, course registration and/or academic advising appointments or other “routine” knowledge that students eventually acquire on their own, these students start out at a higher risk of failure because the school cannot adequately provide the levels of knowledge and information needed to navigate through the institutional processes.

Best practice institutions have discovered, sometimes through trial and error, that working with and actively communicating with students between the times that they confirm their admission by paying their deposits through the time they actually set foot on campus (or officially log in for online programs) can ease the burdens of “learning the system” and better prepare students for their experiences.

Establishing a system to identify what data or consents are wanted or needed from students as well as what information must be provided to students is a key first step in creating a positive student experience. These needs and wants will vary depending on whether the information are related academic or administrative processes, if there is a time-critical element involved with the information sharing (deadline driven, inability to proceed with other tasks, etc.) or if there’s just some other need to know (i.e., personal preferences vs. academic requirements).



HOW CAN TECHNOLOGY HELP US TO HELP THEM?

In a data-driven world of decision making and knowledge building, there should be no qualms about leveraging any and all technology resources to share information to enhance two-way communications and facilitate information sharing and data acquisition. Often, we tend not to optimize communications channels or technology platforms because of conflicting priorities, lack of information technology (IT) resources or differences in philosophies or opinions among functional users. These reasons and many other similar viewpoints cause colleges and universities to minimize or even ignore that creating a positive student experience is the key element in retention, graduation and in the longer term, donations and alumni engagement.

How can schools best leverage technology to communicate with students and enhance both their experiences and performance? Start simply by looking at how you are messaging and delivering your notification or request. While students are primarily your target audience, consider if and when your outreach is being directed to parents, prospects, alumni or other constituents in the campus community.

Outbound communications are another area where institutions need to better recognize and adjust their messages and requests to different student populations and their related characteristics. First generation families may not have knowledge of the college experience and its requirements that are found in other groups where parents and siblings already have navigated through campus life. Language barriers may impact international students’ understanding of expectations. Other categories of students may also require either more targeted or neutral language to respect diversity or similar issues.

Taking advantage of institutional marketing departments and their expertise in crafting language and messaging should become a best practice that's implemented for other student-facing business units and departments, not just focused on the admissions process. Clear and concise language is crucial in any outbound message, whether via email, text, portal or website posts or even with a snail mail letter.

Another best practice that schools can easily implement is to create or maintain a coordinating committee that incorporates stakeholders from student servicing academic and administrative offices to identify required information and data needed from or disseminated to students. Through use of online checklists that sequence information categories and completion dates, students can be directed to a portal site or web link to complete and return necessary information (i.e., FERPA waivers, student loan counseling, housing selection, etc.) based on institutionally-determined priorities and due dates. At the same time, the committee can coordinate outbound communications to both students, parents and other constituents based on time sensitivity and due dates. Having a coordinated communications plan minimizes the volume of emails or other correspondence sent to students and reduces information overload coming from multiple college offices which likely leads to students ignoring all of these messages, despite their value or importance.

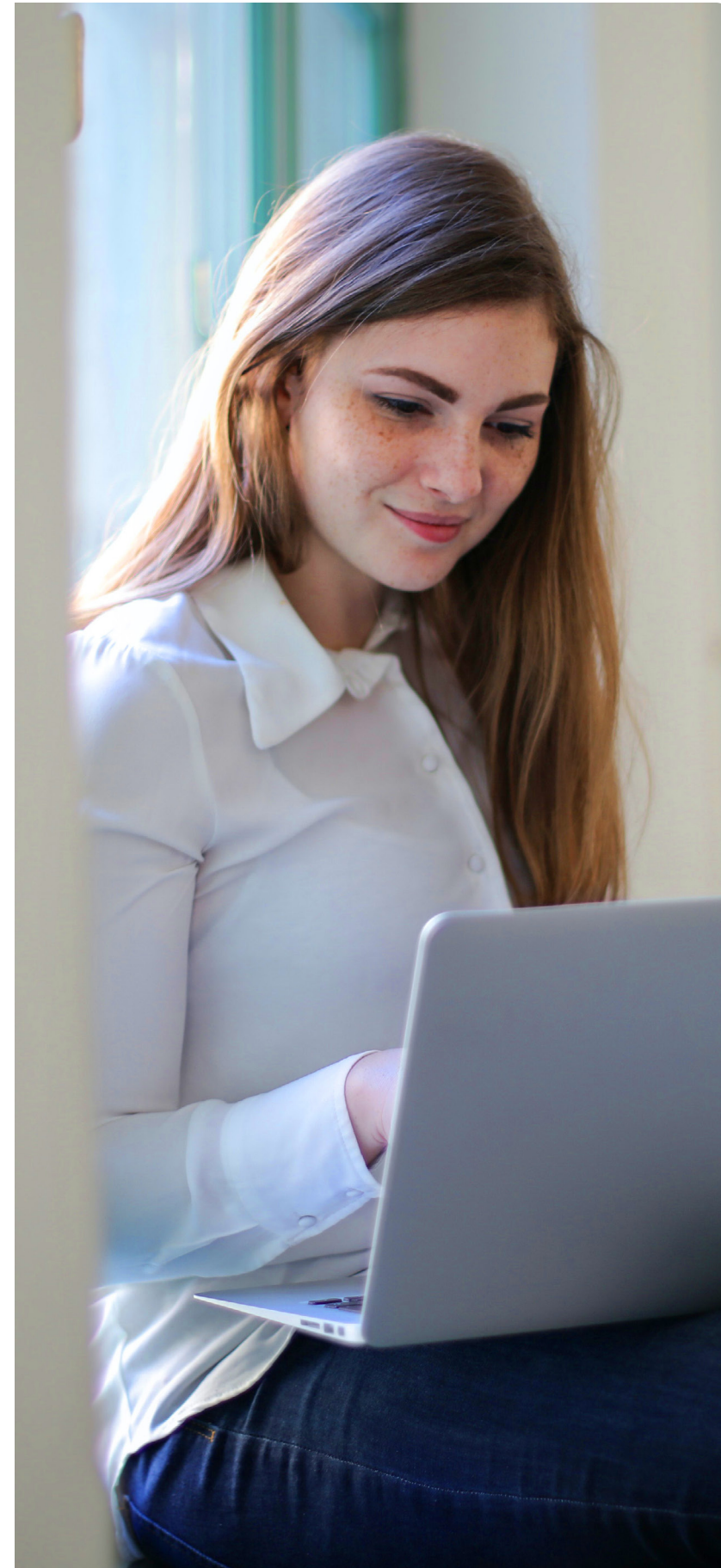
IT and marketing requirements and resources must always be factored into the communications process, particularly when individual departments are overly dependent on a central IT department or resources. While there may be full-time employees or student workers within a department who are adept with social media usage, these offices may lack expertise in proprietary systems or software applications used for email, portal or web-based

communications (both outbound and inbound). Although it may be a luxury at some colleges to have skilled staff within individual offices, it is beneficial to have control of departmental messaging for quick responses and handling of trending situations or notifications rather than a reliance on a central IT source where you must justify a request and wait for prioritization and action.

Using a portal-based approach to gather information and obtain student contents can maximize institutional efficiencies and priorities since the portal will become the "one-stop" place to find and return data while allowing multiple departments to piggyback into the application. Through quality branding and effective communication to educate students and other users for the portal, institutions can greatly enhance their messaging and make it consistent rather than risking inaccurate or outdated information popping up on individually-managed websites.

Portals provide the most efficient vehicle not only for sharing information, but also for obtaining required and even optional student consent to meet various compliance requirements, such as FERPA waivers, accepting financial aid awards, student loan entrance counseling and, most recently, financial responsibility agreements acknowledging rights and responsibilities inherent with paying for one's education, as well as potential consequences for non-payment.

Equally important, students and other users who have been authorized to look at specific information, particularly billing statements and payment links, can easily find necessary information without having to navigate through numerous sites and applications. Simplicity found through the portal creates an easier journey through the administrative processes that are necessary as part of the student experience.



When considering how to best use changing technologies, look to mobile applications and accessibility through personal devices rather than force users into laptops, desktops or kiosks. Enabling students to do their business on their phones or tablets will encourage them to act sooner and meet deadlines with less friction and pushback.

However, it's important to make sure that all communications options are available since one size does not fit all for any group of students, parents or other customers. Recent surveys show that while students don't necessarily like email, they will use that tool to communicate when it's most convenient for them to respond or share information.

As you're looking to create a best practice environment, enable "choice" when considering how you're going to communicate with students and other campus constituents. Think about how to best use multi-channel communications deftly so your important messages are not lost in junk...or just ignored. Develop a well-honed and thought-out "3-C" communications plan for reaching out to students, parents, prospects, alumni and employees that offers messaging which is:

- **Clean**
- **Concise**
- **Consistent**

Bring together representatives of student-facing offices, both administrative and academic, to consider how and when to reach out to receive and deliver important information so as not to create an information overload, which eventually leads to a complete tune-out of the school's notifications and requests. Ignoring or disregarding messages leads to missed deadlines, additional fees, many more inbound calls, emails and office visits, and ultimately to a poor customer service and student experience.

CREATING YOUR STUDENTS' CHECKLISTS

Best practice institutions help new students help themselves and feel part of the campus community by providing them with a to-do list of items requiring their attention and action. Usually coordinated by the campus office responsible for student orientation programs, these online checklists help students gather necessary information and complete required forms on a timely basis without need for persistent follow-up.

Taking advantage of portal-based checklists with real-time updating can simplify and ease the path for two-way transfer of information and data needed by students and school, alike. These checklists and online forms also facilitate the gathering of required student consent or acceptance for various functions and processes, such as FERPA waivers, agreement of financial rights and responsibilities, or input of designated emergency contacts.

Here are some helpful hints (though not a complete list) of items to consider for building your student checklists:

- ☐ Identify the responsible office(s) that will gather and disseminate requirements and design the checklist.
- ☐ Determine how/where the student checklist will be housed (i.e., portal, website).
- ☐ Involve all academic and administrative offices to build out their requirements.
- ☐ Centralize the information gathering functions.
- ☐ Engage your IT department to design and/or build the pages and links to other related pages or sites.
- ☐ Determine where completed information will be housed, considering institutional data privacy and security requirements for maintaining personally identifiable information (PII).
- ☐ Establish a feedback loop to inform students how to complete required forms and notifications that task(s) are completed or require action.

Managing a successful orientation process and positive student experience requires much planning and constant tweaking of your processes. Starting with a basic outline of what's needed by the school and what should be shared with students before they arrive on campus can make or break how your "customers" feel about you and your institution.

At a time when colleges and universities are facing decreasing enrollments, more scrutiny from legislators, regulators and accrediting agencies, in addition to questions from students and parents about the value of a college education, it's important to take advantage of technology and marketing resources to enhance our communications to students, recognize their differences and tailor our messaging to maximize an effective and efficient environment that creates not just a positive student experience while in school, but builds an outcome for student success that will last for a lifetime. ■

David R. Glezerman is currently the Managing Partner of The DRG Group, LLC, which works with colleges and universities as well as third party business partners on training and business process management issues. David spent 40 years in higher education management, retiring from Temple University as an assistant vice president.

To learn more, visit:
thedrggroup.com



The New Digital Ecosystem of Higher Ed

Brian Alexander
Chief Product Officer



Over the past two years, higher ed rapidly deployed all kinds of technology in response to the pandemic to deliver quality education, while fighting tooth and nail to maintain a sense of community for students. It's hard to argue that these efforts represent one of the most impressive achievements in the history of education, and that these efforts have resulted in a fundamental and undeniable shift in the world of higher ed.

As the pandemic tore across North America in May of 2020, John O'Brien wrote in Inside Higher Ed that "technology can no longer be seen as a utility working quietly in the background. Now more than ever, technology is a strategic asset that is vital to the success of every institution." This insight has proven completely true, with institutions rushing to plug gaps created by the uncertainty of in-person and remote student life with a myriad of new point technologies.

Added out of necessity based on the unfolding emergency, new technologies (and their interfaces) joined an already complex tech stack students must interact with daily — anchored by the LMS and SIS — which in many cases have chugged along on-prem for 20 years. These stopgap measures were crucial as schools transitioned to the new normal — a world where the necessity of maintaining both in-person and remote, digital environments that work for students — will never go away.

The resulting technology ecosystem existing almost universally across higher ed encompasses a loose collection of highly siloed systems, typically focused on providing a narrow set of services with little to no interaction with other components of the ecosystem. IT teams have almost exclusively approached these silos as a technical challenge, introducing middleware

to allow the myriad of systems to share data back and forth. While middleware solves the back-end challenges associated with managing this complex ecosystem, it's now unequivocally clear that the front-end complexity of bouncing between countless point and source systems represents an enormous risk for the adoption and success of these investments.

Perhaps no better example illustrates the overwhelming nature of this dilemma than the traditional student portal. Over the past two years these seldom used, dusty old link farms have been pressed into service as the primary place institutions send students to access the technology, content and information they need to navigate their day — on campus or off. Due to the sheer volume of information needing to be shared, and an almost complete lack of personalization capabilities, the student portal has become in practice a virtual treasure hunt where the proverbial X marks the spot, with students needing to traverse a dense, digital jungle of general and dated links to get what they need. Adding to the confusion, many schools have implemented separate mobile apps surfacing parts of what are typically displayed on the portal, adding a second treasure map to the hunt. Though perhaps effective as stop gaps in the initial phases of the pandemic, the one-two punch of the traditional link farm portal and the disconnected mobile app confuse students to the point they won't use them.

The majority of institutions have in part solved the technical problem of stitching together the plethora of systems operating to support students. Many also technically solved the issue of making crucial information and systems available, publishing all things to all people in several disconnected places. In practice, this schema is often so complex that it's unusable by those it's supposed to support — students.

This reality — with enormous stakes related to recruiting, retention and overall student success — results in a new crisis for how schools leverage technology now and in the future.

A massive void exists at the center of the higher ed digital ecosystem because there is no centralized user experience hub unifying all things digitally. In an ideal setting, this centralized user experience would:

- Integrate together any relevant point or source system in a way that surfaces highly personalized content and information to students on a single dashboard — on any device.
- Consolidate and personalize all institutional communications, from emergency alerts, to advisor communications, to event notifications into a single, unified place.
- Administer secure online spaces for groups, clubs and individuals to connect and build community digitally.
- Deliver a consistent user experience throughout the entire student lifecycle, actually amplifying the investments, technology, and resources available to students by making them usable and accessible.

Creating this centralized hub means seamlessly integrating a variety of systems together so rather than being a one-stop shop to display several pieces of technology, those systems actually make each other stronger.

We're moving away from an era where we ask "what systems can exist in this hub?" to "what outcomes can this hub enable?"

With outcomes being the new backdrop to the higher ed digital ecosystem, I laid out a new framework to help higher ed discover a variety of outcomes all within one hub.

IT'S ABOUT OUTCOMES, NOT INTEGRATIONS

Most portals have a dramatically improved UI that by design should be more aesthetically pleasing to students. However, they still look busy and are difficult to navigate. Aside from not helping students figure out where to turn their attention, the more integrations a portal has, the more complicated it becomes.

That's why an outcome-based approach, which pulls multiple sources of data together in a single view, is more useful than a dashboard with several links that are difficult to interpret. This difference, while seemingly subtle, is meaningful, and represents a massive improvement for the student experience. This method provides more context and makes it easier for students to take action as needed without overwhelming them.

Here are some outcomes that can significantly help students get more value from their portal.

Lead Nurturing and Student Engagement

Imagine a world where you bring together your favorite LMS, SIS and CRM into a tightly integrated, seamless user experience. This experience allows institutions a holistic view of the student from prospect to alumni through a single pane of glass, while delivering greater context of who students really are. This helps deliver more valuable content to the student, increasing the likelihood of conversion while improving connection between student and staff. Students now receive more relevant information in their outreach and get timely task notifications so they never fall behind throughout their higher ed journey.

Asynchronous Learning Enablement

As the adult learning population in higher ed surges, it's crucial for institutions to re-think how to better attract distance learners. For distance learning to work long term in higher ed, two things must happen. First, the classroom must be immersive, going beyond the typical video chatting experience. It should mimic an in-person interaction as much as possible with students engaging in proximity-based chat and the ability to move through virtual classrooms. This is especially important if the "Metaverse" proves as disruptive as some predict it will be in higher ed. It also requires institutions to find innovative ways to keep meaningful student connections without creating video chat fatigue. The distance learning experience needs to honor student agency by allowing them to create the remote environment they desire without facing any technological barriers.

On-Demand Virtual Tours

Prior to the pandemic, guided on-campus tours were the main vehicle in higher ed marketing. Institutions sent their most polished student ambassadors on tours with hundreds of students every day to show the most scenic parts of campus and newly renovated buildings in hopes of aweing prospective students. Although on-campus tours largely continue, prospective students also want to discover and view the campus on their own time. Self-guided, virtual tours remove the barriers brought by expensive flights, along with the costly time commitments to visit campus. This is especially important for institutions trying to attract students of different backgrounds and income levels. Inside an engagement hub, students access all the information they need from the comforts of their own home at any time of day — *especially on mobile.*

Agile Marketing Content Creation

Does the relationship between marketing and IT resemble the toxicity of Twitter debates these days? If IT constantly asks marketing, "why can't you just make that update on the website," this integration is a game-changer for your institution. Seamlessly weaving in your CMS and course catalog helps mitigate many of the website-related tensions between the two departments by giving the marketing team an easy-to-manage content hub within the portal itself. With IT departments across the country short-staffed, any opportunity for marketing to take simple tasks off their plate helps the institution run more efficiently. On the marketing side, institutions have rapidly changing content needs and can control messaging for both prospects and current students effectively with no roadblocks. Integrating a CMS in your engagement hub makes it so even non-technical members of your marketing team can easily make changes.

On-Demand Student Support

The student of tomorrow will have even less interest communicating over email and phone than today's student. Many institutions address this trend by combining chatbots and student success platforms to provide 24/7 on-demand support. This combo provides a rich mix of data schools analyze to derive risk factors and triggers, notifying administrators when a student needs more personalized attention, while spreading awareness of campus resources to all students. For institutions looking to improve mental health outreach, chatbots often identify the most at-risk students. These actions drive student retention and increase satisfaction across campus.





Secure Single Sign-On

Most institutions already help their students seamlessly use all their apps with SSO. However, many current solutions on the market don't adequately counter potential cyberattacks — leaving entire systems vulnerable. When an SSO provider suffers significant downtime as the result of an attack, this results in devastating outages for students, including their portal. While it's difficult to bullet-proof an institution's SSO from attacks, best in class vendors take all available precautions to mitigate that risk. In addition, the level of communication a customer success team provides helps institutions make critical decisions to minimize the damage done to an institution.

Post-Graduation Job Placement

While institutions become singularly focused on recruitment, students are now more determined than ever to turn their higher ed experience into a meaningful salary. Students no longer want to wait for on-campus recruiting events or spend their summers post-graduation aimlessly applying for jobs. They want to feel empowered in their job search at every step of their college career.

Community Creation and Management

Merging your community app with event planning and student life systems gives your hub more of a social network feel. Given this generation relies almost exclusively on social media for communication, creating an environment for students to build culture at your institution gives them a reason to keep coming back. Students no longer need to rely on word-of-mouth or Facebook groups to get attendees to their events. Now, they invite peers while keeping their social media accounts private, organizing everything happening on campus in a single view. This capability also works well in a more intimate campus environment where student groups often seek participation from faculty and staff.

WHERE THE DIGITAL ECOSYSTEM IS HEADED NEXT

Think about what a game changer it was when Netflix started recommending movies and shows based on what you've already watched. This type of recommendation engine has become completely ingrained in consumer software experience — people don't even notice it in action these days. But they certainly recognize when it's not part of the experience.

This same technology must permeate student portals, and guess what — some of it's here already — and the rest is 12-18 months away.

Remember the treasure hunt analogy? Now imagine pushing the treasure to the student on a mobile app that delivers exactly what they need...without scrolling through the link farm. Instead, the app *curates* what the student sees, with two or three relevant actions the student should take each day based on campus deadlines, student preferences or anything else it picks up from the student's unique role.

Chances are students would be infinitely more engaged with your portal...and you'll never have to worry again about adoption. Instead, students will finally leverage a one-stop hub, closely resembling the way the rest of their world already works. You'll never have to worry about students missing important deadlines or bogging down your student services staff with questions (and more importantly answers) they just as easily find on their own.

The new digital ecosystem of higher ed is unequivocally headed in this direction, and it's only a matter of time before a real Netflix-like experience becomes a reality in the world of

student portals. When this happens, students will receive updates as soon as they're announced, rather than get buried on a website or in a student's email inbox.

Many of the problems related to retention — whether it's summer melt, a lack of community, faculty support or the ability to identify at-risk students — will all improve once this technology is mainstream at campuses all over the world. Could this mean the current power struggles existing around technology budgets might dissipate, as this new hub simplifies and amplifies current and future technology investments? That's what we're betting on.

The winds of change in higher ed tech continue to accelerate. As institutions face more competition over fewer students, (and staff and faculty consider leaving higher ed for greener pastures), investing in forward-facing technology will go a long way towards helping campuses run more efficiently while addressing these looming challenges. Fortunately, that future is basically here. ■

Letter from the Co-Founders

Something to Think About

2022 has been another tumultuous year in higher education. It's something we've heard loud and clear from institutions as mergers and turnovers happen across the country. Faculty and staff alike are burnt out as administrators feel the pinch filling a number of positions.

At the same time, students question the value of higher ed more than ever before. Getting a degree is no longer enough. Instead, students want assurance that the investment made in their education results in a satisfying and lucrative career.

Amid all the chaos in the world, for staff and students, Pathify connects everything at your institution in one place while creating a personalized experience for each student. We're here to help make the college experience more consistent, connected and just plain simpler for everyone.

To our customers: if we're not making yours or your students' lives easier, we want to know about it. Email us at chase@pathify.com and let's set up a conversation.

For anyone looking to simplify their experience — let's talk about how we can make yours and your students' lives easier.

After reading our magazine, we hope the stories you read from institutions and experts in higher ed will inspire you to believe that college life can be simpler, richer and more stable.

Chase Williams

Chase Williams
Co-Founder

James McCubbin

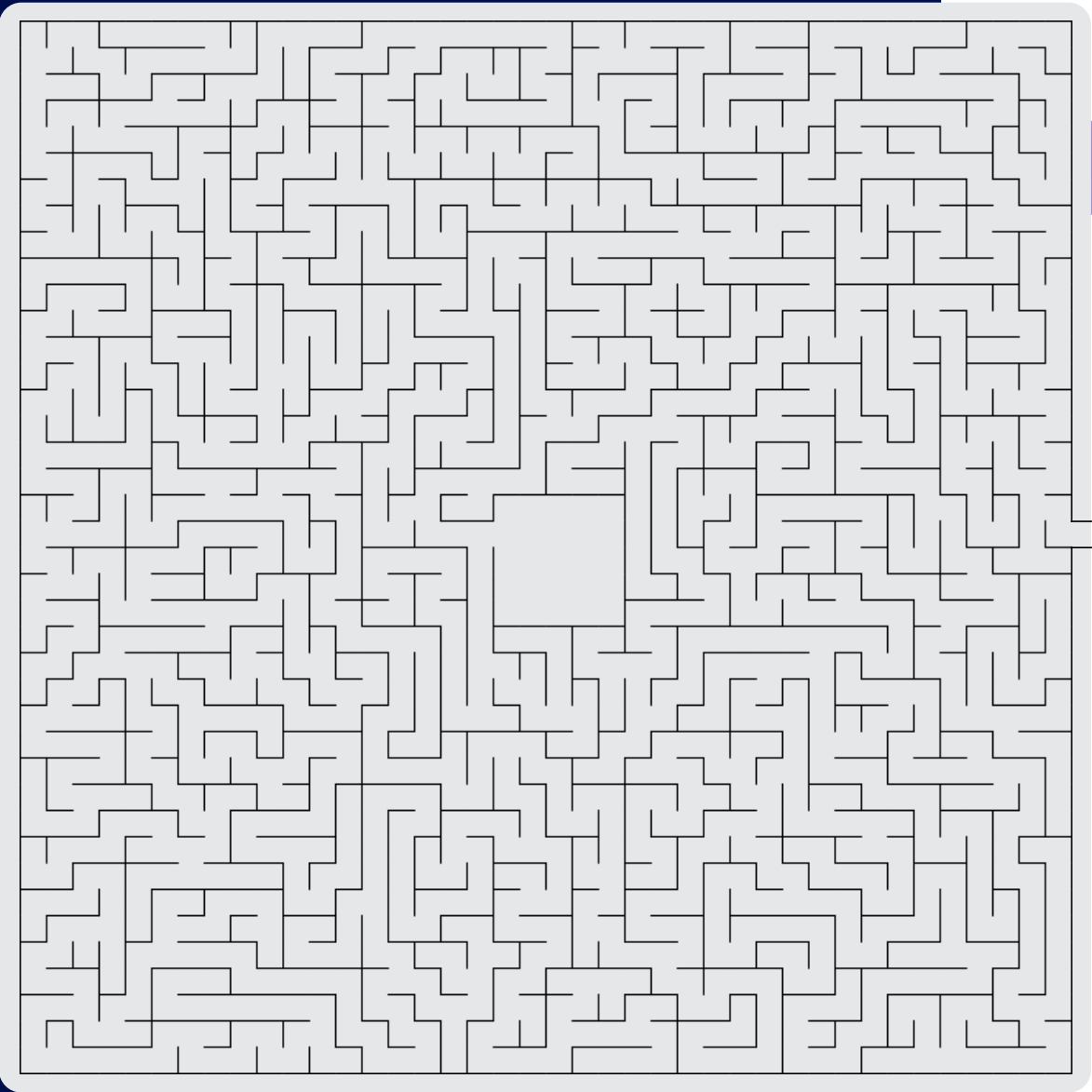
James McCubbin
Co-Founder

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



Brain Games

Escape the Maze



[Click here for answer key](#)

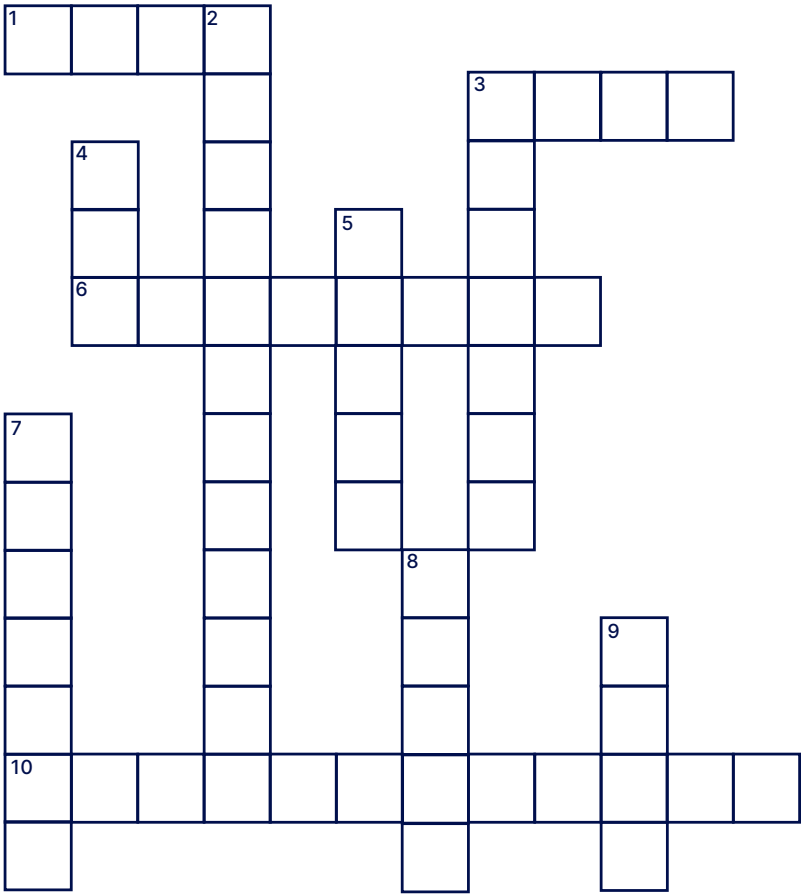
Higher Education Wordsearch

- Admissions
- FAFSA
- Portal
- Scholarship
- Transformation
- Cocurricular
- LMS
- Registration
- SIS
- ERP
- Orientation
- Retention
- SSO

T K T S Q L Q S L B E U M N N
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R S N O I T N E T E R P R E F

EdTech Jargon Crossword Puzzle

- ACROSS**
- 1. Accessibility standards from WC3
 - 3. Students bring personal devices from home
 - 6. A constant and continuous learner
 - 10. On-demand, remote learning
- DOWN**
- 2. Increase learning engagement with badges
 - 3. Combines in-person and online learning
 - 4. Learning through activities
 - 5. On-demand availability of data storage
 - 7. A simulated classroom online
 - 8. A technical standard for e-learning products
 - 9. Free online courses aimed at unlimited participation



What's Next



Matt Hammond
Chief Revenue Officer

I'll preface this by saying I'm still **very** new to higher ed. I've been with Pathify in various capacities for about three years now, and I'm frequently reminded that's just a blip on the radar compared to many of the folks I talk with that have made careers in higher ed.

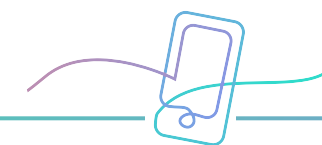
I've been fortunate the past three years to have had a million conversations with schools all over the world, and I continue to be amazed at people's willingness to coach and teach me about such a fascinating industry. In fact, some of my favorite people — Jeff Ledoux from Johnson and Wales University, Brett Ingerman from Tallahassee Community College, Rick Shaw from Antelope Valley Community College (just to

name a few) — are some of the most interesting folks I've ever sold to. We're pretty fortunate at Pathify to have such amazing customers.

Maybe it hasn't been a million conversations, but some quick back of the napkin math tells me I've spoken with over 1,000 schools in the past three years. So while I'm no higher ed expert, I do have a unique opportunity to listen (at scale) to big picture themes and topics. Up until about five months ago, student success permeated nearly every conversation. Retention, finding (and hopefully impacting) at risk students, summer melt — these topics were discussed non-stop, and I love the fact the Pathify Engagement Hub actually moves the needle for each.

About five months ago I detected a rapid (and almost universal) change in the conversations I was involved in. Almost overnight, most stopped talking about student success, with the conversation shifting to student acquisition. So while I may not be an expert yet in higher ed, if I do know anything...it's sales and marketing. And it's dawned on me that finally I actually do have some subject matter expertise to bring to the table.

Student acquisition in the most competitive market in history is basically sales and marketing. Schools hate thinking of students as "consumers," and their educational services as a "product," but the reality is the schools that embrace sales and marketing concepts as they consider student acquisition will outperform those that don't.



There will be schools embracing student acquisition that will win in the next few years, and there will be schools that refuse to adapt and invest in technology as an acquisition tool.

These schools will lose.

It's simply impossible to argue that pulling what makes your school unique forward in a student's evaluation process will not result in more conversions. The Pathify Prospective Student module makes this happen, and it's no surprise that nearly every customer I've spoken with in the past few months is raring to get it set up.

So here's some unsolicited advice from a grizzled old sales and marketing veteran. Pull your student portal forward and get it into

prospective students' hands early...and often. Configure a public view that enables prospects to self-register, and gather what information you can early on to provide them a personalized experience as they evaluate your school. Assign them to digital groups where they communicate virtually with advisors, student ambassadors and alumni. There is no better way to market your school...this will drive increased conversions.

Push your recruiting CRM behind the scenes where it belongs. Pathify's single pane of glass will deliver a better user experience, and provided you're also planning to use our student portal, you'll dramatically streamline a user's transition from prospect to student. Democratize student acquisition by making it available to everyone, and include virtual campus tours, digital community features and the resources that make your school unique. Creating a curated, highly personalized dashboard for prospective students that consolidates all communication and delivers social connection gives you a serious leg up when recruiting. This is a leg up schools need as the world gets more and more competitive, and the lift is a matter of weeks, not months or years.

I'm still **very** new to higher ed...but I'm an old, grizzled vet when it comes to marketing and selling. There is literally no better opportunity to outperform institutions focused on the same old student acquisition campaigns and techniques. And it's never been more important to evolve and adapt. As student acquisition continues to surface as a key focus in most of our conversations, you can look forward to this being a major topic, capability and opportunity for Pathify to set your school apart.

I couldn't be more excited to keep having these conversations. If you'd like to chat, I'm the guy cooking hot dogs in the parking lot outside of EDUCAUSE...come on down or email me at matt@pathify.com. ■



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