

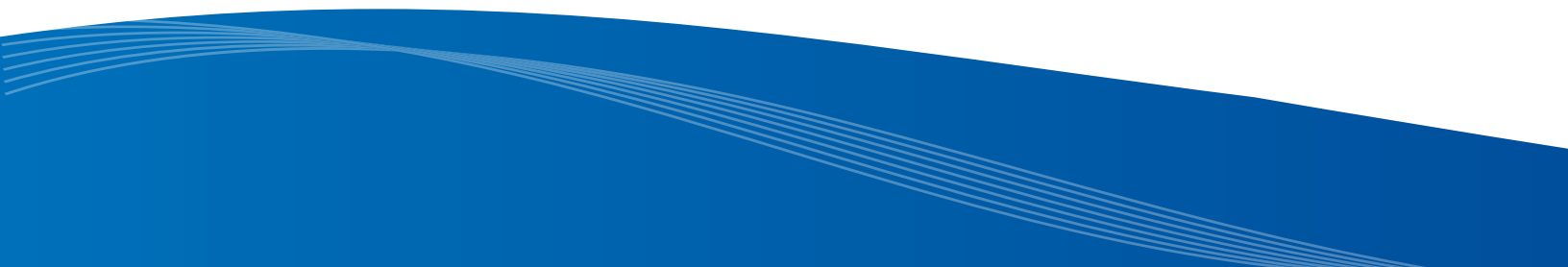
# How to Drive Enrollment and Retention Across the 4 Stages of the Student Lifecycle



**Jenzabar**<sup>®</sup>

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# The State of Higher Education Enrollment

Students are the heart and soul of the higher education landscape. Institutions must work constantly to attract and retain students to achieve long-term success and profitability, which means they must keep students' needs and interests at the center of recruitment and retention efforts. Stakeholders across the institution must meaningfully engage with students at each point in their learning journey, from when individuals are first researching a college through their graduation and evolution into alumni.



**The struggle to recruit students was already intense, and it is evident that colleges' existing concerns about meeting enrollment goals will only get more intense."**

**David Hawkins**  
Executive Director for Educational  
Content and Policy  
National Association for College  
Admission Counseling<sup>1</sup>

The challenge is that enrolling and retaining students in today's higher education landscape is no easy task. Meanwhile, there are true financial ramifications in a world where institutions are increasingly tuition-dependent. With more programs to choose from than ever before, campus leaders must find new ways to stand out and appeal to prospective students. In a 2020 study of senior admissions officials from 433 institutions, Inside Higher Ed found that most respondents expect enrollment numbers to decrease in 2021.<sup>1</sup> This decline is part of an ongoing trend of decreasing enrollments with a forecasted 2025 enrollment "cliff" that isn't expected to bottom out until 2031, according to the Chronicle of Higher Education.<sup>2</sup>

With enrollments trending downward for the foreseeable future, institutions must focus on reducing melt and encouraging individuals to return to campus following semester or annual breaks through graduation. This is a substantial challenge given the myriad of external circumstances that can sway a student's opinions, including changes in the economy or an individual's financial capabilities, poaching from a different organization thanks to recent changes to the NACAC Code of Ethics, bad overall experiences with a particular institution, and more. According to the latest data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), only "about 62 percent of students who began seeking a bachelor's degree at a four-year institution in fall 2012 completed that degree at the same institution within six years."<sup>3</sup>

Given the inherent challenges associated with enrollment and retention in higher education, it's in an institution's best interest to prioritize the student experience and build recruitment, retention, and long-term support initiatives around the student. By taking a student-centered approach, institutions will likely remain financially solvent and find it easier to keep students on the path to overall success.

But there is a caveat—today's student is much different than yesterday's student.

## The Modern Student: Who Are They?

Today's students come in all shapes and sizes. Most prominently, however, student bodies are increasingly comprised of learners from Generation Z, individuals born after 1996. Gen Zers are more likely to attend college than individuals from previous generations. According to Pew Research Center, 57 percent of 18- to 21-year-olds no longer in high school in 2018 were enrolled in a two-year or four-year college.<sup>4</sup> This is an increase from Millennials (52 percent) and Gen Xers (43 percent).

Generation Z learners are also unique because they grew up with smartphones and their perceptions are framed by always having the world at their fingertips. As a result, Gen Z students have high expectations; they want institutions to leverage mobile-friendly applications and enable seamless digital journeys. Generation Z learners want to be engaged personally on their preferred platforms.

On the other end of the spectrum, the population of adult learners is also increasing on campus. Based on data from NCES, the percentage of students who were 35 years old or older and enrolled in degree-granting postsecondary institutions increased by 25 percent between 1999 and 2013.<sup>5</sup> This is expected to increase by another 10 percent through 2024. And while these students may be older than Gen Z learners, many of them have similarly high expectations, given they've witnessed the rise of "as-a-service" organizations.



**Students are used to the convenience of a click or swipe, and they've built this expectation into all aspects of how they use the internet, including for the purposes of higher education."**

**Lisa Slavin**

Assistant Vice President of Enrollment Management  
Massachusetts Bay Community College<sup>6</sup>

After growing accustomed to the likes of Netflix, Amazon, and other online commerce platforms, modern students have come to expect self-service digital experiences in other service delivery areas. Modern students discover content on their own at their pace. They use smart devices and are savvy consumers who do their research to identify the best-rated products or services that meet their needs. They expect seamless digital experiences. They expect new forms of interactive engagement throughout their online journeys.

## Interacting at Every Stage

Although the process is generally longer, students often mirror the typical buyer's journey when deciding which college they should attend. This commonly consists of three phases, with an additional long-term phase that is critical to higher education institutions.

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▶ **Awareness**

An individual expresses interest in higher learning and is researching the opportunities associated with pursuing higher education.

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▶ **Consideration**

A prospective student recognizes the benefits of higher education and has shortlisted the best-fit institutions that meet objectives.

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▶ **Decision**

A prospective student chooses to apply to a specific institution.

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▶ **Advocacy**

A student is currently enrolled or has graduated and should now promote the institution to other potential students or return to the institution as a lifelong learner for reskilling or upskilling.

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Every step in this journey is critical for both students and institutions. As a result, institutions must build meaningful engagements at every point in the lifecycle. Without this student-centered approach, higher education institutions will likely see mixed performances across enrollment, retention, and student satisfaction programs.

# Awareness

## How Do You Get the Attention of Prospective Students?

Recruitment is a core responsibility for higher education institutions. If a college or university is to grow, it needs to attract students at every available opportunity. Given the tech-savviness of today's learners, this means that an institution's digital presence is often the first connection with prospective students. Because an institution will never get a second chance at a first impression, staff need to capture the attention of an individual and deliver the right message in the right way and nurture prospects through the process.

### Leading With the Brand to Raise Awareness

With so many options, institutions need to build their brand in ways that define how they are different from competing organizations and that emphasize how they are the right fit for prospective students. In this way, an institution needs to ensure that it delivers a clear message for why students should spend their money on what the college has to offer.

In many cases, an institution's website is the initial portal for information transparency and sharing. Colleges and universities need to take a student-centric approach to their website to maximize brand awareness and recruitment effectiveness. In a TargetX and mStoner study of high school juniors and seniors who were searching for a college, 54 percent of respondents said an institution's website was very or extremely important in their decision.<sup>7</sup> A website's design should be built around a potential student's journey; information should be easy to find and clearly defined.

Similarly, social media, which has skyrocketed since its adoption among digital-savvy consumers wielding smart devices, is an extremely important recruitment tool for institutions to establish their brand and connect with prospective and existing students. Although the TargetX and mStoner survey revealed that an institution's website is more important than their social channels, the study highlighted that social media is still important for digital-native students. Institutions can even use social listening tools to better understand how they are perceived in the market and what changes they can make to improve their image.



**Social media allowed me to view my college's culture and environment.**

**While deciding on what university to attend, I used Instagram as a platform to view each university's environment as well as clubs within the universities, which helped in my decision."**

*A 2019 High School Senior<sup>7</sup>*

## Personalizing Outreach to Drive Interest

The old saying “quality over quantity” rings true when it comes to recruitment in higher education. In most cases, institutions that take targeted, personalized approaches to recruitment will experience more rewarding long-term outcomes, including increased retention and more alumni advocates. But how do you personalize at scale when the term personalization can cover a wide range of subjects, such as personable communications, personalized content, and tailored journeys?

Institutions need to consider their audience and the preferred channels used by prospective students. Younger students, like Gen Z learners, may be more inclined to use social media channels, for example, which means the content distributed on those platforms should target a younger audience. Conversely, adult learners might be more inclined to check their email. Institutions should define and identify their target personas and use the appropriate channels to improve engagement with those audiences.

In terms of content, institutions must be flexible and deliver content that is relevant to the recipient. Sending bulk content that doesn't necessarily address the pain points of any singular audience can sometimes be more harmful than sending no content at all. This is because people have become accustomed to receiving tailored content. Today's students are well aware of how cookies work when browsing the internet and they are likely familiar with the recommendation systems provided by service providers like Amazon and Netflix.

Additionally, because users may access an institution's content through different means, there shouldn't be a universal journey for all prospective students. For example, a Gen Z learner may research an institution's campus life and extracurricular activities through social media using their smartphone. As a result, their journey to the website should be different and more dynamic (mobile-friendly in this case) than a student who may have accessed a different landing page through an email campaign on their laptop.

Institutions need to leverage innovative marketing automation, recruitment, and CRM platforms that enable the delivery of dynamic content to different personas. This personalization can go a long way in influencing if a student attends one college over another.

# Consideration

## How Do You Get Shortlisted?

Today's consumers are used to shopping around online for the best available offer, using public rating websites to their advantage. When deciding on which college to attend, however, there are a lot of factors for a prospective student to consider, including campus life, total cost, financial aid opportunities, job placement, overall reputation, and more. In most cases, individuals will not make their final decision overnight.

Institutions should be prepared to nurture prospective students by providing relevant information and engaging with individuals along the way. At the end of the day, the objective is to get students to be knowledgeable and confident enough about an institution to apply. Students should be sure that a school is going to be the right fit for them and that they will have an enjoyable and supportive experience that will prepare them for success upon graduation.

### Nurturing Students Down the Funnel

Institutions need to begin building relationships with prospective students during the consideration phase. If students don't feel wanted or that they don't have any connection with an institution, it is unlikely they will attend that college. Enrollment staff should establish touchpoints at this phase in the student's journey to build relationship opportunities.

Touchpoints can mean a lot of different things, including checking in on a prospect with a personalized email or call, hosting an in-person campus tour, or organizing a virtual event. As technology progressed and apps became more prominent, SMS messaging has become a popular way to encourage individuals to apply. Meanwhile, social media, strategic ad placements, blogs, and other forms of digital media have become more common channels upon which institutions can establish a touchpoint.

### Resonating on Digital Channels to Build Familiarity

Millennials and Gen Zers are generally more passive when it comes to communications, with many preferring to use digital channels instead of speaking in person. According to a LivePerson survey of more than 4,000 18-34-year-olds around the world, 65 percent of respondents said they would rather communicate to another person digitally than in person.<sup>8</sup>



This was even higher in English-speaking countries (roughly 74 percent in the U.S. and U.K.).

With this information in mind, higher education institutions need to engage creatively with prospective students through digital channels. Outbound marketing initiatives like email nurture or drip campaigns, which can continually raise awareness of various benefits of attending a specific university, can be highly effective for demographics that check their email often. Inbound tactics like digital advertisements and social media posts that lead to informative blogs or landing pages can be impactful for individuals who browse the web while doing research.

While the transition to digital recruitment efforts can lead to more enrollment opportunities, institutions must define and measure key performance indicators (KPIs) to assess the effectiveness of campaigns. Data analysis tools can be a significant help in this area, allowing institutions to turn complex data into easy-to-understand information that can be used to improve campaigns. By measuring outcomes regularly, staff can adjust and optimize their efforts for better results.

## Communicating Creative Learning Opportunities

One of the ways institutions can ensure they are on a prospective student's short list is to communicate any unique offerings or programs that set them apart from other schools. This is challenging in today's environment, especially when some institutions rely on headlining their state-of-the-art facilities and impeccable grounds as the pinnacle college experience.

Institutions must understand their value proposition, brand, and constituents to truly differentiate themselves. Campus leaders must ask what is truly different about their institution and programming. What distinctive academic assets should be emphasized and developed? What initiatives should be stopped so other areas can get investment?

Many institutions are leveraging alternative methods of learning to entice students and keep them retained over longer periods. Support for competency-based education (CBE) programs in particular is gaining traction in the industry as institutions recognize its ability to improve enrollment and retention. Unlike conventional academic programs that require students to attend courses for a set number of hours, CBE initiatives encourage self-paced learning journeys in which they can demonstrate their mastery of a subject based on the





**What we see in the research data is the phone truly becoming an extension of the self, and the platforms and apps within it—digital life—occupying more than their offline interactions.”**

**Rurik Bradbury**  
Global Head of Communications and Research  
LivePerson®

program's predefined metrics. These types of programs are attractive to adult learners or individuals who are looking to improve their skills to open new avenues of success in their professional careers.

In other cases, institutions are turning to unique differentiating experiences to attract students.

## Several Creative Colleges With Unique Opportunities for Students

<p>GOUCHER —college—</p> <p><b>Goucher College</b> Townsend, Maryland</p>	<p>Students are required to study abroad as part of the institution's mission to ensure students embrace an international perspective.</p>	<p>More information: <a href="https://www.goucher.edu/learn/study-abroad/">https://www.goucher.edu/learn/study-abroad/</a></p>
<p> <b>Cornell College</b></p> <p><b>Cornell College</b> Mount Vernon, Iowa</p>	<p>Students follow the institution's "One Course at a Time" philosophy in which they study one subject during each 3.5-week term.</p>	<p>More information: <a href="https://www.cornellcollege.edu/one-course-at-a-time/index.shtml">https://www.cornellcollege.edu/one-course-at-a-time/index.shtml</a></p>
<p><b>Colby</b> </p> <p><b>Colby College</b> Waterville, Maine</p>	<p>Students participate in the institution's "Jan Plan" program, during which they can use the month of January to host a variety of academic experiences, such as internships, conducting research, or studying abroad.</p>	<p>More information: <a href="http://www.colby.edu/januaryprogram/">http://www.colby.edu/januaryprogram/</a></p>
<p><b>Kenyon</b></p> <p><b>Kenyon College</b> Gambier, Ohio</p>	<p>Students have access to a 500-acre nature preserve as well as a 10-acre farm that is run completely by students.</p>	<p>More information: <a href="https://www.kenyon.edu/campus-life/sustainability-green-initiatives/kenyon-farm/">https://www.kenyon.edu/campus-life/sustainability-green-initiatives/kenyon-farm/</a></p>

# Decision

## How Do You Increase Application Rates?

If an institution is shortlisted, staff must engage with students on multiple fronts to encourage their application. The total cost of education, financial aid options, and even job placement rates following graduation are all factors that weigh into an individual's decision to attend a college. Institutions must be responsive and supportive when connecting with students by demonstrating the unique differentiators of their campus and how they enable success during and after college.

### Offering Clear Financial Aid as a Differentiator

In a study of more than 54,000 students, EAB found that roughly 11 percent of students opted not to attend their dream school.<sup>9</sup> Of that group, approximately 40 percent cited cost-related concerns as a reason to forgo their preferred institution. In today's economy, institutions that offer financial aid packages that are relevant and timely can attract a wider audience and possibly sway opinions for students who are on the fence because of monetary concerns.

Providing one-of-a-kind financial aid packages to students may be enough to incentivize acceptance. However, institutions need to ensure that financial aid offers are delivered on time and are understandable to individuals who may be unfamiliar with the process. The latter is a particularly common issue with many of today's financial aid letters. In an analysis of 515 financial aid award letters from unique institutions, New America and uAspire found that about 70 percent grouped all types of financial aid and did not provide definitions regarding the differences between grants, scholarships, loans, and work-study programs.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, roughly one-third of the letters omitted the total cost by not including any information with which to contextualize the financial aid offer.

To say that students are often confused with financial aid is an understatement. One way to encourage students to apply to an institution is to provide support through the financial aid process. Staff should make themselves available to provide answers to students, especially if an individual is a first-generation college student who may not be familiar with the financial aid or college application process. Being transparent and open will give students more insight into an institution and its culture.

### Highlighting Student Success Rates to Showcase RoE

Job placement and overall student success metrics weigh heavily on an individual's decision to apply to and attend a higher education institution. People are very aware of rising student debt, which Forbes placed at roughly \$1.56 trillion in 2020.<sup>11</sup> Institutions need to demonstrate student outcomes during and after college to encourage more applications; they need to show that students will get a positive return on their investment or, in this case, a return on education (RoE).

Institutions should showcase clear connections between available areas of study and long-term payoffs—in terms of monetary value and job placement. One of the best ways to

highlight the bridge between education and the job market is by offering comprehensive advising services to students. Institutions with the ability to help students identify potential careers early in their education journey will likely have happier students and will develop more personal relationships between faculty, staff, and students. This naturally leads to richer discussions regarding educational and professional career development.

Highlighting the alumni network can help institutions showcase the success stories of their students, demonstrating long-term possibilities following graduation. These networks can also open career opportunities for existing students if they engage and build relationships with alumni and institution advocates.

## Improving Customer Service to Meet Today's Expectations

Interactions and transactions with an institution need to be easy from day one. If students struggle to complete tasks with an institution, e.g. filling out financial aid or completing the application process, then they will likely apply elsewhere, as early problems may be indicative of troublesome future engagements with a school. With today's digital-savvy, mobile-oriented students, institutions need to deliver experiences that individuals have come to expect as consumers.

An institution's culture and technology are among the biggest roadblocks to delivering excellent customer service. A big piece of the cultural puzzle exists in the mindset of staff as well as operational processes. Institutions need to create seamless experiences for prospective students by eliminating barriers and simplifying procedures. Tasks like accepting an offer, registering for courses, and even signing up for campus life activities need to be easy. Staff should be available on-hand to answer questions should they arise. Colleges can also use chatbots and other digital engagement channels to remain "open" for support 24x7x365, while simultaneously eliminating department silos by providing answers to myriad questions through a single interaction.

Meanwhile, if institutions are leveraging antiquated technology, then processes that should be intuitive can turn into complex and time-consuming nightmares. Colleges and universities must leverage modern technologies that can enable digital, mobile-first experiences for students. Institutions should simplify the application process as much as possible, making sure that the instructions are clear, easy to find, and easy to understand. There is no one-size-fits-all approach to technology in higher education, which means institutions will need to find the right mix of in-person and digital strategies to support students.



**Accessibility is also incredibly important. A lot of schools are heavily dependent on their website: almost all admissions offices will tell you their number one point of contact with prospective students is online. If their website isn't clean and easy to navigate, they're not going to get very far with new enrollments."**

**Lisa Slavin<sup>6</sup>**

# Advocacy

## How Can Students or Alumni Promote Your Institution?

While conventional or creative marketing and recruitment campaigns are pivotal in helping higher education institutions increase enrollment, colleges and universities should not overlook using testimonials to promote their school. If student experience (a significant factor in a person's decision to attend college) is the totality of a student's interaction with the institution, then staff should leverage case studies of their most loyal brand supporters: current students or past students (alumni). In this way, an institution's retention rate often plays a direct role in its enrollment success.

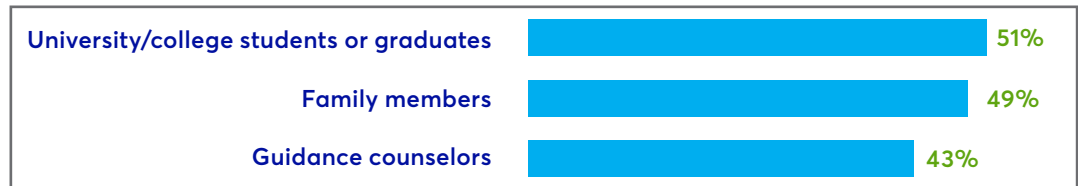
An institution's retention rate is one of many ways to measure how satisfied students are with the college they are attending. But numerous factors contribute to student satisfaction and persistence, including an institution's ability to advise students, how much support students are given throughout their learning journey, financial aid options, academic and professional development, how well an individual fits with campus life and culture, and many more. If an institution's retention rates are low, however, prospective students may see that as a red flag. As such, colleges should vocalize testimonials from existing and past students to sway any concerns.

Alumni and students should be seen as an extension of an institution's brand. Colleges and universities should highlight these individuals as sources of aspiration and inspiration.

### Displaying Current Experiences to Draw Interest

One of the most compelling ways to convince prospective students of the value and quality of an institution is to have people who know it best share their experiences. Current students can provide authentic insight into what it's like to be part of an institution. In fact, prospective students often place the most trust in feedback from current students and graduates. According to a 2020 Glacier study of nearly 1,400 high school students, 51 percent said existing college students or graduates are the most trusted resources for information that can influence their decision to attend an institution.<sup>12</sup>

## Who do high school students trust the most when making decisions about college?



*Glacier, 2020 Gen Z Media Report – The State of Postsecondary Marketing to High School Students*

Institutions should consider giving current students a voice through digital channels, like social media or parts of the website. Harvard University, for example, maintains a compelling student blog that covers topics like choosing a major, securing summer internships, getting through finals week, and things to do in Boston. While this is certainly helpful to current students, it also gives prospective students a glimpse into what life is like on campus.

Social media also presents institutions with an opportunity to demonstrate what life is like on campus. Institutions can recruit current students or even hire influencers to produce and share content across their personal feeds as well as the college's branded channel. Institutions can use platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and Facebook to demonstrate life and activities on campus to attract new students. Using strong hashtags with large followings can also allow institutions to expand their reach, especially if posts are liked or created by influencers.

The challenge is that social media preferences are always changing. Instagram, for example, has become much more popular than other channels like Facebook in recent years. As such, institutions should take a multichannel approach and do their best to keep pace with what channels are trending among prospective students.

### Highlighting Alumni Stories to Showcase Long-Term Outcomes

Alumni, people who have graduated from the institution, can also be valuable advocates who can help attract new students and encourage existing students to return. Institutions should display the professional successes and college experiences of their alumni, have alumni speak with and meet students, or have alumni engage directly with prospective students via recruitment efforts. Having experienced graduates engaging with current or prospective students can give students an avenue to ask questions or even get advice and guidance.

There are many different opportunities for alumni to interact and engage with prospective students. Institutions can hold events or mixers where prospective students can meet and network with alumni. Additionally, institutions can create—or task alumni with creating—chapters or alumni groups in different cities, allowing individuals farther away to engage with alumni on more familiar territory, rather than traveling to campus. Social media can play a role here as well, as alumni can set up networking groups and communities on LinkedIn or Facebook to share their stories and connect with current or prospective students.

Graduates who strongly agree that they were challenged academically are **3.6 times more likely to say they were prepared for life outside of college.**<sup>13</sup>

Alumni can also provide insight into whether they believe their academic journey was worthwhile. According to a 2018 Gallup survey of more than 5,000 college graduates, roughly 42 percent of respondents said they strongly agreed that they were challenged academically at their institution.<sup>13</sup> Further, the study revealed that the graduates who said they were challenged during college were 2.4 times more likely to say their education was worth the cost and 3.6 times more likely to say they were prepared for life outside of college. Showcasing these types of advocates and displaying their stories can help students feel more confident in their decision to attend an institution.

Sharing alumni experiences and encouraging interactions between past and current students with current or prospective students may help institutions attract new individuals while keeping existing students happy and engaged in their learning experiences.

## Conclusion:

# Why a Student-Centric Approach Matters

The challenges associated with enrollment and retention in higher education will likely persist in the immediate future due to increased competition, unpredictable economic turbulence, and changing expectations among students. However, institutions that approach these obstacles by focusing on what matters—students—may find it easier to attract new students and retain existing students.

Engagement, which has always been critical, has become even more vital in today's hyper-connected digital economy. Staff must connect with prospective and existing students proactively at the right time and through the right channels to help their institution improve student enrollment and retention.



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Created out of a passion for education and a vision for technology, Jenzabar offers disruptive, innovative software solutions and services that empower students' success and helps higher education institutions meet the demands of the modern student. Over 1,350 higher educational campuses harness Jenzabar solutions for improved performance across campus and a more personalized and connected experience for the student. For further information, please visit [jenzabar.com](http://jenzabar.com) or on twitter @Jenzabar or LinkedIn.

