How to Break Down the Barriers to Student Success in Higher Ed

Jenzabar
TRANSCENDING EDUCATION

CONTENTS

New World, New Responsibilities

Student success, by its name alone, sounds like it relies heavily on student performance. While this is certainly true to an extent, there is a shift in the higher education landscape as the definition evolves and the stakes become greater for institutions.

To a learner, the definition of a successful higher education goes beyond the advancement toward graduation and good grades; it also encapsulates a holistic sense of fulfillment. As such, student success no longer sits solely on the shoulders of students; institutions are much more invested and involved in ensuring long-term positive outcomes for students.

In the past, it was assumed that a student's success or failure primarily depended on the efforts of the student. Today, student success is also seen as dependent upon the efforts of the institution. Simultaneously, as this reality becomes clearer, institutions are facing unprecedented challenges. Colleges and universities around the world are challenged with attracting and retaining students, receiving state or federal funding, demonstrating the long-term value of receiving higher education, and more. Meanwhile, competition in the higher education environment is growing as smaller colleges are forced to close their doors permanently, mergers and acquisitions become more common, and institutions implement new operational or learning models to become more attractive. Now, more than ever, an institution's livelihood rests upon being able to demonstrate and replicate successful outcomes for students; student retention is directly tied to an institution's survival.

77%
of Gen Z students say college experiences outweigh the price.

Higher Education's Shifting Perceived Value

The overall perception of higher education is changing. Unlike the past when students would question which institutions they should attend, now they are debating whether attaining higher education is even valuable. What is the return on investment (ROI) or, more appropriately, the return on education (ROE) at one institution compared to another?

According to Advent's College Choice Study, pursuing a degree that helps students get a good job is among the top choices when selecting an institution.[1] The study, which surveys hundreds of high school students each year, also revealed that the value and experiences associated with attending an institution often outweigh the cost of going to college.

"Seventy-seven percent of Gen Z'ers say that price is secondary compared to the experience they receive," said Todd Cyphers, Vice President of Implementation at Advent, at the Higher Ed Facilities Forum. "This is why they're willing to pay for $4 Starbucks instead of grabbing a 99-cent coffee at a gas station. Gen Z wants a brand to represent them and be part of their story."[2]

This massive shift in the perceived value of higher education—moving away from the total cost and long-term outcomes to fulfilling experiences—is particularly applicable in a post-pandemic world in which students are starving for the "college experience." Yet, with declining enrollment and retention rates as well as decreasing revenues and funding, institutions must refocus their attention on critical initiatives, such as programs that prioritize student success and meet students' expectations for their desired college experience.

Aligning Student Success Definitions Across Campus

Building and driving student success programs on campus require getting everyone on board with a unified definition and objective. Yet, prioritizing student success is not a new concept; institutions have emphasized student success for many years.

Students are essentially the customers for higher education institutions, as they expect a certain level of service or return on their investment. In this sense, institutions must do all that they can to cater to the expectations of students or they risk damaging their reputations and limiting growth. The challenge is that different institutions, departments, and cohorts across campus all have varying explanations for what student success means and how institutions can best promote it.

Challenges in understanding and pursuing meaningful student success programs directly relate to how much definitions of student success can vary from institution to institution. A large four-year school may focus largely on student progression and graduation. A heavily research-based institution may look to develop students who become innovators. A vocational or two-year college might be more focused on students achieving certificates and employment. Because an institution's definition of a successful student is often driven by mission objectives and institutional purpose, it only fits that these differing emphases create very different conceptions of success. The inability to compare student success across institutions makes it even more paramount that institutions clearly define and communicate what they view as a successful student. This allows prospective students to find institutions that better fit their desires in terms of outcomes and experiences. This crucial alignment leads to greater success.

This challenge is not only prevalent across institutions but within institutions. Student success can also mean different things to different departments, even if they are part of the same institution. An enrollment manager, for example, may strictly measure student success by looking at student retention rates from one year to the next. Conversely, academic departments may base student success on a variety of on- and post-campus metrics, such as GPA, internships, graduate school acceptances, or job placements. The provost's office may measure how successful students are by looking at degree attainment and graduation rates, while the registrar's office may focus on things like course withdrawal rates and degree progression. Meanwhile, student affairs staff may measure student success by looking at engagement in co-curricular activities and how many students become well-rounded adults.

Students also do not agree on a standardized definition for what success means to them. For some, success is getting great grades. For others, it's about getting a job. Others still might consider success as being the first to graduate in their family or participating in an academic or athletic championship. The important thing is that students should buy into their institution's concept of student success and feel that it aligns well with their perception. This fundamental alignment will ensure educational commitment which, in turn, can increase academic measures of success, such as course performance, progression, and graduation.

> **Departments and cohorts across campus all have varying explanations for what student success means and how institutions can best promote it.**

What Does Student Success Mean to Whom?

Department/Role	Goal
President/C-Suite	Increase retention rate to secure funding or improve in rankings
Admissions Department	Recruit students who are most likely to matriculate
Registrar Department	Improve degree attainment and graduation rates among students
Student Services Department	Ensure students use and achieve professional and academic success through their services, e.g., career development and tutoring
Athletics Department	Achieve athletic success and keep students eligible to play sports
Faculty	Ensure students can demonstrate mastery over a subject (that faculty are teaching)
Student	Graduate with a degree, get a good job after graduation, have a fulfilling experience, and more

Core Criteria for Aligning Student Success

Forward-looking institutions that prioritize student success eliminate silos between departments and strategically establish their program using standardized definitions and objectives. These institutions align student success initiatives by understanding which external and internal factors impact those programs and how different departments and stakeholders can support long-term goals. Notably, strategic student success programs often focus on the following areas.

▶ **Cohorts:** Which cohort needs the most support to experience success? Should the largest population in cohorts on campus be prioritized?

▶ **Risk Factor:** Which students are at risk of dropping out or having poor experiences? How can institutions implement changes that will reach the most students?

▶ **Trade-Offs:** Which resources can be aligned to hit objectives? Can more resources be applied to a specific area to improve student retention and experiences?

▶ **Scope:** Can certain approaches be molded or adopted to eliminate silos and support a campus-wide approach?

Most institutions prioritize student success at some level, although their tactics and approaches vary in maturity. Not every college or university has a fully mature model that empowers students to have positive experiences and outcomes with minimal disruption. To maximize student success, institutions must review their strategy, identify its level of maturity using a standardized scale, and refocus their efforts to ensure better outcomes.
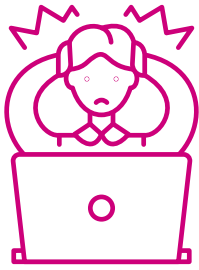
The Journey to a Mature Student Success Program

Institutional student success programs can be mapped to a scale comprised of four different levels.

Every institution's student success program lives somewhere on this scale, but not every institution begins or ends at the same spot; some institutions are established with an innate focus on student experiences and outcomes and therefore are designed to support more mature student success programs, while others may have never prioritized student success and thus begin at a less developed level.

In many cases, moving along the journey to a fully mature program is critical if institutions want to survive in the unpredictable and unforgiving education landscape.

Level 3
Mature Student
Success Program

Get senior leadership to universally support a renewed focus on student success

Build a team specifically focused on driving student success across campus

Level 2
Adolescent Student
Success Program

Identify and monitor external factors that review student success programs

Incorporate student information into more activities and programs across campus

Level 1
Nascent Student
Success Program

Recognize the value of prioritizing and aligning vision for student success

Designate certain personnel to focus on student success

Level 0
Lack of Centralized
Student Success Initiative

Level 0
Lack of Centralized Student Success Initiative

At level 0, an institution either has no student success strategy in place or has multiple competing initiatives on a small scale. This type of college or university will likely encounter difficulties in the coming years as student needs evolve and institutions are pressured to deliver more holistic and satisfying experiences.

How Jenzabar University Moves From **Level 0 to Level 1**

At Jenzabar University, decision-makers have begun to recognize that student success is a vital component to their long-term sustainability. As such, the institution has designated that certain personnel, like the Director of Advising, will allocate a fraction of their time to enabling student success-making changes in their areas of expertise to achieve success.

Level 1
Nascent Student Success Initiative

At level 1, an institution's student success initiative is relatively nascent. This type of institution understands the need to focus on student success and is taking some sort of approach, although it may not be all-encompassing or focusing on the right areas. In many cases, these types of colleges or universities take one of the following approaches, depending on how the institution views student success.

1. Academic-Centric

With an academic-centric student success initiative, the institution largely measures success on student advising, grades, tutoring, attendance, and other similar metrics.

The core stakeholders in an academic-centric student success program include advisors, faculty, and department leaders.

2. Student Service-Centric

Institutions that have a service-centric student success initiative generally measure success on student behavior and activities. This includes event attendance, mental well-being, extracurricular involvement, as well as participation in campus life activities.

The core stakeholders in a service-centric student success initiative generally include residence life members and departments.

While neither of these approaches is poor, there is a clear discrepancy in focus, which a more mature model would address.

How Jenzabar University Moves From **Level 1 to Level 2**

External constituents that look at institutional student success rates, such as U.S. News & World Report Ranking, the Department of Education, as well as accreditation bodies, have underlined the importance of retention and student success. In many cases, institutional funding is directly tied to the rankings from these organizations, which pressures institutions to prioritize student success and other measurable initiatives.

Spurred by these external players, Jenzabar University begins to incorporate student information into more programs and processes, which allows faculty and staff across campus to become familiar with using data and identifying trends.

Level 2:
Adolescent Student Success Initiative

With a level 2 student success program, an institution has taken a hybrid/combined approach that eliminates some of the silos between the two approaches in a level 1 initiative. This is considered an adolescent student success approach.

At level 2, an institution is using student and operational data to measure success, although the data may be limited in scope or does not permit any user on campus to access it. To move to the next level, institutions with this degree of a student success program need to consider opening access to shared data and enabling holistic, common views of the information.

Institutions at level 2 are also primed to build more common, campus-wide goals, which will progress them to the next level. Decision-makers across campus should come together to discuss a shared strategy for student success and retention that can be applied to the entire institution.

How Jenzabar University Moves From **Level 2 to Level 3**

After becoming familiar with incorporating data into more programs, Jenzabar University builds a team that is specifically focused on driving student success. This team manages critical student and operational information and enables teams across campus to view and access the data.

Backed by senior leadership across campus, this department is primarily responsible for improving student success at the institution. Everyone on campus believes in the message and vision of this initiative and is making changes in their areas of expertise to achieve success.

Level 3:
Mature, Campus-Wide Student Success Initiative

The first indicator that an institution has a fully mature, level 3 student success program is that there is an established student success executive or team. This individual or team is solely focused on enabling student success across campus. This level indicates that decision-makers and leaders have taken a top-down approach to student success by developing specific roles meant to enable it.

Indicators of an institution's commitment to student success:

▶ There is a dedicated Director of Student Success who leads a team or office in that domain. The sole mission of this team is to help students reach their goals and objectives.

▶ There is a centralized approach to managing concerns, e.g., retention challenges are managed through a single office to simplify accountability. The student retention office should coordinate all retention activities across different departments and should be the primary liaison for anyone who has concerns or questions regarding student retention.

▶ The institution has identified at-risk or concerning students as those with academic, personal, and/or behavioral challenges.

▶ Communications with students are built around student preferences, which can include face-to-face conversations, as well as text, email, or social media messages.

How to Break Down the Barriers That Inhibit Student Success

The importance of prioritizing student success cannot be understated. Institutions that want to improve student enrollment and retention will need to focus on nurturing positive outcomes and experiences on campus. Below is a brief synopsis of what institutions can do to promote long-term student success.

Get Leadership on Board

Institutional leadership will play a pivotal role in enabling student success; leaders should help to break down barriers on campus and establish a culture that will cultivate student success. Ultimately, institutions that focus on student success need to nurture a culture and campus-wide mentality that focuses on improving student experiences and mitigating challenges.

Leadership should also be responsible for organizing a student success team, which will be the primary driver and liaison for student success programs across campus.

Leverage Innovative Technology

Technology can be a significant component of a student success enablement program. Today's institutions are capturing more data on student behavior and activities than ever before. With the right data analytics solutions, colleges and universities can better understand which students or cohorts are at risk, which individuals are having unsatisfactory experiences, and which staff across campus can intervene to mitigate attrition.

Institutions can also use predictive technologies to build an early alert system, which informs support personnel of students who hit criteria that may indicate concern. With these platforms in place, student success teams can work with peers across campus to intervene and help course-correct students back on track to success.

Promote Visibility and Accountability

Student success is multi-factorial, which means it spans financial, academic, social, and other domains. However, that doesn't mean that no one is accountable. While everyone on campus is a stakeholder for a student success program, a specific team should ultimately be responsible for and given the authority to maximize retention and student success.

A student success team should be held accountable for helping leaders on campus identify risk factors as well as who is responsible for addressing challenges in those areas, including faculty, residence life, or other staff. They should also be empowered to make and enforce their student success initiatives.
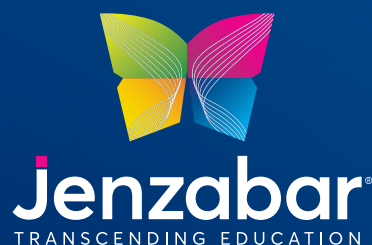
Taking a relationship-driven, student-centric approach to student success will more likely ensure positive outcomes and better experiences, which can contribute to better student enrollment and retention rates. As the higher education landscape evolves and modern learners begin to perceive the value of higher education differently, it will be vital for colleges and universities to have an institution-wide student success program that is designed, from the top down, to support and cultivate positive experiences and outcomes for students.

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About Jenzabar

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 or on twitter **@Jenzabar** or **LinkedIn**.

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