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3 Strategies for Increasing Student Success Amongst First-Generation Students

Executive Summary

Current statistics show that 33% of first-generation students drop out by the 3rd year of college, as opposed to 14% for continuing generation students. Shifting populations entering higher education, continual increases in first-generation college student enrollment, debate surrounding rising tuition and costs, and genuine desires for a rise in graduation rates and a better prepared workforce has demanded a shift in how institutions can equitably allocate resources to their first-generation students.

Compared to their continuing-generation peers, many first-generation students lack familial income support, general college know-how, degree planning expertise, and social/professional connections. Yet, first generation , a lower percentage used health, academic advising, and academic support services, which begs the question: how can we better serve this population and improve outcomes? Implementation of three tactics can be a good starting point for higher education institutions:

1 | Give first-generation students a blueprint for success – and do it early

2 | Enable advisors to be proactive, rather than depending on students to seek support

3 | Use digital channels to foster better student engagement

Today's generation of students are increasingly diverse and require institutions to accelerate technology initiatives in order to scale personalized support

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1 | Give first-generation students a blueprint for success - and do it early.

Early degree planning plays a crucial role in predicting a student's psychological, emotional, and logistical future –– influencing both academic comfort and engagement, regardless of familial academic history. First-generation students confront all the same pains and difficulties as their peers, but have additional hurdles on the path to degree attainment. It is imperative to recognize that poor degree management systems impede that end. Conversely, robust academic blueprints provide peace of mind. Equipping first-generation students with an adequate degree plan secures their sense of studenthood at an institution and clearly lays out their academic objectives.

In order to better serve non-traditional students, institutions must adopt degree management systems with intuitive design and an easy user experience to accommodate a growing population of students who are "new" to the college environment. For example, course registration and degree audits are infamously hard to navigate, and could partially explain why only 30% of first-generation students report engaging with academic support services.

These systems can garner far more engagement when their design and user experience mimics the apps these students use in their everyday life. Whether it's enabling first-generation students to collaborate on their degree plan with their advisors virtually, or elevating degree maps from static catalogs to dynamic, guided pathways that students can access in an app, making academic services more modern and approachable is key to driving student engagement.

2 | Enable advisors to be proactive, rather than depending on students to seek support.

Many students struggle with their transition to college, a problem exacerbated for first-generation college students, who are often left to navigate the transition without advice from their families. Accustomed to accomplishing things on their own, first-generation students are likewise often hesitant to ask for help from administrators and faculty.

Instead of relying on first-generation students to reach out to their advisors for help when they are falling off-track, advisors must be proactive in their support. To do this, identification is key. Advisors need to be able to quickly and effectively filter through those target groups of students and apply support where needed. Early intervention before problems arise could mean the difference between a college dropout and a college graduate.

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While early intervention is important to first-generation student success, proactive support pre-arrival can have a powerful impact setting up first-generation students for success before they even step foot in a classroom. These students often feel isolated when they arrive on campus, which can have repercussions on their persistence and success, so it is important for institutions to initiate catered outreach and support at the very start. However, it's easy for first-generation students to fly under the radar without proper tracking or visibility.

Universities can begin tracking this information in a number of ways -- through admissions applications, incoming student surveys, orientation registration and scholarship applications. However, without a centralized tracking system and powerful filtering and reporting on these groups, that data is not actionable. Now more than ever is the time to abandon antiquated degree management systems and adapt to the changing climate of postsecondary education.

3 | Use digital channels to foster better student engagement.

Equally important for fostering engagement is the method of advisor–student communication. Institutions have to confront the 21st century realities of pandemic life where incoming students expect their universities to have transitioned to updated channels of communication. Distance learning has emphasized the pertinence of good academic advising -- students collaborating with their advisors virtually on academic plans provides reassurance in a time that feels so uncertain.

Advisor outreach is predominantly conducted through email and office hours, but text reminders, shared notes, and virtual meetings are preferable for today's students who increasingly seek on–demand support. Offering more approachable channels for advising improves the likelihood that a student will utilize an advisor to clarify academic or career goals, or to connect with other relevant faculty or services -- both of which are outcomes that promote student success.

For instance, Florida Atlantic University moved its operations online during the pandemic, they experienced half as many no–shows for advising appointments (from 16% to 8%). Other institutions such as Tufts University, University of Chicago and Colorado College use Stellic's degree management platform to promote first–generation student engagement by enabling students to directly message and collaborate with their academic advisor through the same system they use for course registration, audit, and reporting, and no hassle of navigating multiple websites or going to in–person office hours. Virtual support spaces such as these make students feel empowered to self–advocate and drive their success.

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Conclusion

The main takeaway in considering these strategies is that as post-secondary demographics become increasingly diverse, each institution must carefully consider all the tools and systems available and craft a support strategy that is equitable and accessible to all. This involves a reframing in higher ed. Rather than simply determining whether students are college-ready or not, institutions will need to evaluate whether their campus is student-ready with today's generation of students.

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About Stellic

Stellic was founded by first-generation students at Carnegie Mellon University on a mission to build higher-ed technology that resonates with today's generation of students, with the belief that empowered students lead to better outcomes.

The modern, end-to-end degree management platform provides degree planning, scheduling, advising, audit, and analytics solutions to align the entire campus towards on-time graduation and student success.

Stellic is now used in over 110 countries across nearly 30 campuses and counting, helping top institutions drastically increase student engagement and ensure better student outcomes.