

The Future of the Student Experience Is Personal

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A personalized, integrated and coherent student experience will become a key differentiator for higher education institutions, and CIOs need to start building the strategies and infrastructure to make this happen.

Key Findings

- There is a growing focus on the student experience in higher education, driven by an increasing emphasis on student success and scrutiny on educational outcomes.
- The student experience is the totality of the student's interaction with the institution, understood holistically rather than through institutional bureaucratic or organizational silos.
- The emphasis on improving the student experience is increasingly achieved by personalizing that experience for each student.
- Some higher education institutions have begun looking for best practices to adopt and adapt from outside higher education, in industries such as retail and healthcare, which have been focusing longer on the customer experience.

Recommendations

Higher education CIOs innovating their learning environments:

- Ensure that your student experience redesign governance and implementation teams include a full cross-section of stakeholders, including students and faculty, IT staff members, and representatives from enrollment, student services and academic affairs.
- Develop a plan for gathering data about the current student experience as a first step in redesigning the student experience of the future at your own campus. Include looking at historical data (for example, in student information systems, surveys and reports) as well as collecting new data from a variety of stakeholders (for example, student satisfaction surveys and perceptions of service surveys).
- Plan to use data, CRM and emerging technologies (like open digital badges and artificial intelligence [AI]) to power personalization and an improved student experience without adding

additional personnel (for example, by using AI-powered advising chatbots). Begin by developing a plan for the underlying data and infrastructure so that it is possible to use these technologies effectively.

Table of Contents

Strategic Planning Assumptions.....	2
Analysis.....	2
The Student Experience of the Future: From Recruitment to Postgraduation Engagement.....	5
Core Characteristics of the Student Experience of the Future.....	6
Designing the New Student Experience.....	8
Conclusion.....	9
Gartner Recommended Reading.....	10

List of Figures

Figure 1. The Components of the Student Experience.....	4
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Strategic Planning Assumptions

By 2021, more than 30% of higher education institutions will be forced to execute on a personalization strategy to maintain student enrollment.

By 2021, more than 50% of higher education institutions will begin redesigning their student experience with the goal of making it more integrated and personalized.

Analysis

What is the future of the student experience in higher education? Globally, there is an emergent but growing focus on the student experience, and an emphasis on personalizing that experience. This growing focus is evidenced by the number of institutions creating high-level administrative positions that are focused on coordinating and improving the student experience. A large number of universities in the U.K. and Australia have created director-level or vice-chancellor-level positions focused on the student experience; for example, the University of Adelaide has created a pro vice-chancellor (student experience), while the University of Sussex has created the new position "director of student experience."¹ There are also a growing number of institutionwide initiatives aimed at understanding and addressing the student experience as a whole (for example, at George Mason University, the University of Utah, the University of Queensland and American University).²

The roots of this growing focus lie in a number of areas:

Declining enrollment, resulting in greater competition for students: In a number of locations and for many institutions, there is increasing competition for students because undergraduate enrollment has been dropping. In the U.S., for example, enrollment in degree-granting institutions dropped by 4% between 2010 and 2014,³ following a long stretch of rapid growth. This means greater competition for students, especially among nonelite institutions. Research by firms such as Ruffalo Noel Levitz and others shows a positive linkage between a good student experience and enrollment and retention,⁴ and it is very likely that, as pressure on enrollment grows, an improved student experience will become a key differentiating factor in the capability of institutions to attract the best new students.

More funding tied to student success and satisfaction: There are increased calls for accountability within higher education, and the linking of funding to factors such as student satisfaction⁵ as well as retention, persistence and graduation rates. Efforts to improve the student experience are increasingly seen as critical to both improving student satisfaction and moving forward on frequently stubborn metrics like retention and graduation.⁶

Increase in the proportion of tuition that the students pay for themselves: With students picking up so much more of the tab themselves, there is an understanding that more must be done to make their experience worthwhile, and this poses a challenge because the tuition generally makes up for money that is lost from other sources (such as governments).⁷

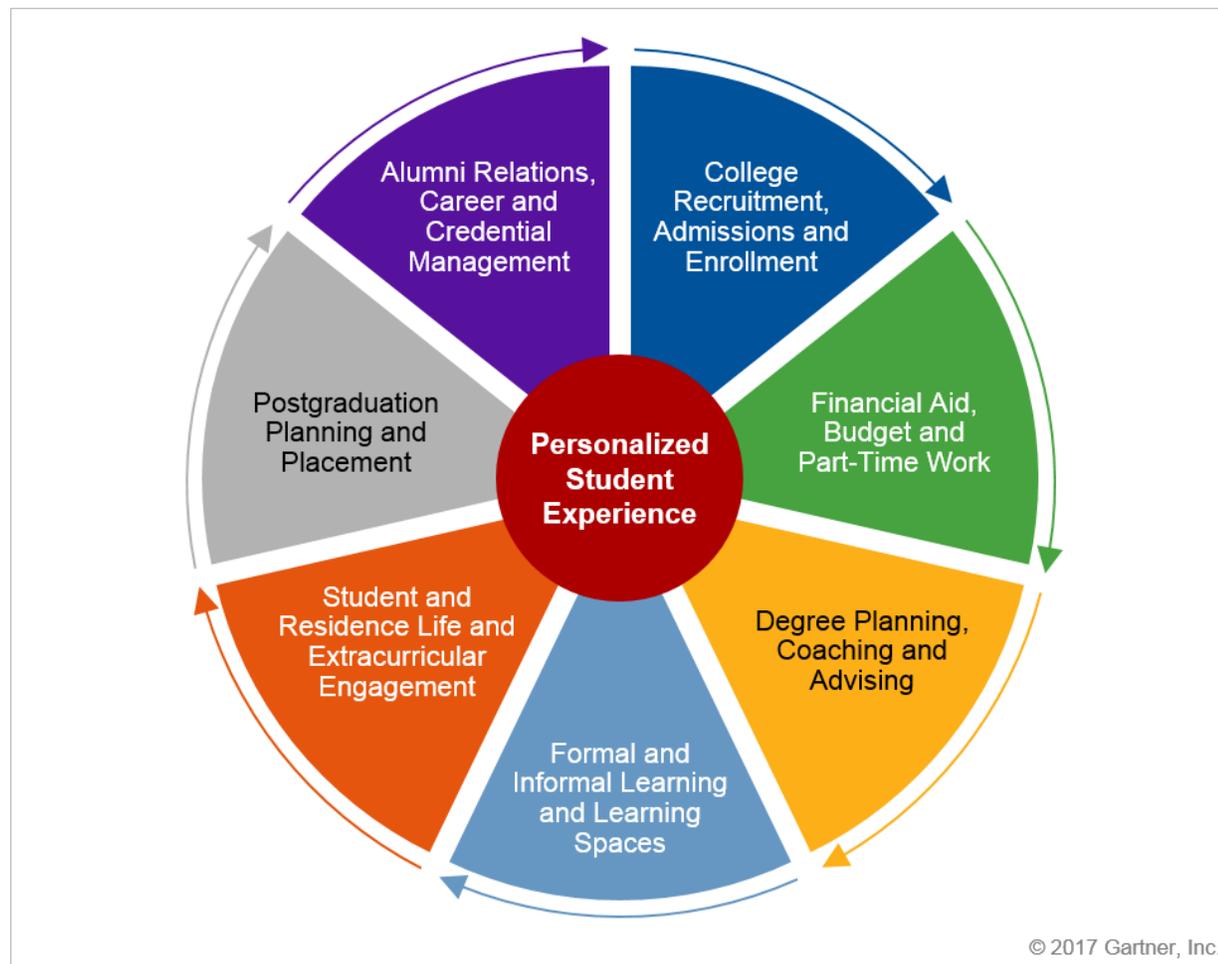
Students' rising expectations for personalization: The increasing digitalization of our society has resulted in a world that is much more accessible, convenient and, at the same time, demanding. Today's digitally minded students have grown up in a world dominated by the internet, social media and smartphones. They now expect these conveniences and this kind of personalization in all aspects of their lives, so they are less tolerant of mass-market, generic and industrialized services (which are the norm on many campuses). They will no longer be satisfied or even comply with antiquated processes and mass-target services. They want their educational and campus life experiences to be reflective of the experiences in other aspects of their lives — both business components (such as retail and banking) and social components (such as entertainment and social media). The academy can no longer hide behind the gates of the institution, but rather must meet students where they are, whether that is in the digital or virtual world, or at the local coffee shop. The institution must now do business on the students' terms, not its own.

Growing interest in looking at examples from outside higher education: Higher education can, at times, be a somewhat insular industry, but there is growing interest in looking at, adapting and learning from innovations in user and customer experiences in other industries, such as healthcare and retail. For example, when American University sought to reinvent its student experience, it looked for inspiration from and visited both the upscale grocery retailer Wegmans⁸ and the Cleveland Clinic.

Still, what is the student experience, and how do CIOs who are turning their focus toward the student experience conceptualize it? In higher education, the student experience is seen as the totality of all aspects of student life — from recruitment and enrollment through postgraduation engagement — in a unified, student-centric manner (see Figure 1). This means changing how we

provide services to students and moving toward targeted, differentiated, integrated and student-driven services.

Figure 1. The Components of the Student Experience



Source: Gartner (April 2017)

Increasingly, the focus is on personalizing the student experience. Personalization is a broadly used term with many meanings. Gartner defines *personalization* as "a process that creates a relevant, individualized interaction between two parties and is designed to enhance the experience of the recipient." It uses insight based on the recipient's personal data, as well as behavioral data about the actions of similar individuals, to deliver an experience that meets specific needs and preferences. In the offline world, this has been accomplished by establishing a one-on-one interaction between the two parties in that interaction. In a digitalized world, this is increasingly accomplished through personalization-enabling technologies, which can scale the personalized experience down to almost everyone (see "Personalize the Online Customer Experience to Drive Satisfaction and Digital Sales").

So, in a higher education setting, a personalized student experience means making each student interaction with the institution more targeted and optimized for a given student so that he or she feels treated like an individual with a unique set of needs and requirements. The University of Queensland has also recognized that: "Students are seeking a greater degree of control over what, when and how they study with personalised advice, technologies and opportunities to better support their individual needs, priorities and aspirations."⁹

Recommendation

Higher education CIOs should:

- Identify what (if any) drivers commonly associated with prompting a redesigned student experience exist in their environment. For example, is enrollment trending up or down; are their government initiatives prompting greater attention to the student experience; or has tuition been rising for students, and is this translating into increased student dissatisfaction? Understanding these drivers will enable CIOs to know whether a redesign of the student experience is warranted and where it is likely to focus.

The categories shown in Figure 1 encompass a holistic student experience. However, to imagine and get a more qualitative sense of what a personalized student experience will look like in the future, we have described a scenario consisting of "moments of truth" (see "How to Design Customer Experiences Using Persona-Driven Customer Journeys") in different domains of student life, and showed what a future student experience will resemble. These moments of truth are key points along the customers' (or, in this case, students') journey where they come into specific contact with your institution and brand — that is, where a feeling or impression is created and they decide (consciously or unconsciously) how they feel about the experience.

The Student Experience of the Future: From Recruitment to Postgraduation Engagement

While still in high school, Jane has an experience using an augmented reality (AR) headset that ignites her interest in global health. This experience uses AR to allow her to visualize flu strains at societal, personal and cellular levels. For Jane, this sparks a new interest in healthcare. That spark is picked up by Yoshi, the robot classroom assistant who detects an increase in Jane's heartbeat. Accessing Jane's academic and interest profile, Yoshi sees that an interest in health is consistent with her aptitude profile, and, as a result, he generates an invite for her to join the school's medical explorers club.

Two days later, at her first explorers club meeting, Jane comes to the attention of both Good Experience University (GEU) and the teaching hospital attached to it. Both of these organizations have a relationship with the explorers club as part of their long-term strategy of identifying good students as well as potential employees and partners. While at an explorers club meeting, Jane's presence is detected by beacons, which alert the system that the university and the hospital have set up. They access Jane's transcript, which she has posted publicly using social media. Recognizing that Jane is a good fit, but someone who is likely to need some support, GEU

negotiates a mix of financial aid offers from federal, institutional and a range of different private providers. They send this offer to Jane and encourage her to formally apply to GEU.

Fast forward two years, and Jane leaves her class on respiratory health, excited by the experience of using simulated patients to test different methods of listening to people breathe, and to practice respiratory therapies. As she leaves, Jane gets a text message from her advisor suggesting that, since she is close by and has an open spot on her calendar, she stop by for a chat. While Jane has been excelling in the applied aspects of her course work, she is having a harder time in some of the more basic science parts of the curriculum, as most recently evidenced by a mediocre grade on a chemistry midterm. Her advisor points out that data models using longitudinal data from thousands of students show that those who get a mediocre grade in this chemistry class tend to not do well later in their course work or careers. While changing majors is an option (and they run through several scenarios of what this would look like in terms of courses needed, student aid required and career options available), Jane's advisor suggests that she start some remedial work that uses data-driven adaptive learning to target the foundational gaps in her knowledge. The advisor also suggests that, since Jane does not live in a student residence hall, she should use the university's private social media to identify other students who are struggling in chemistry in order to form a study group.

These recommendations do the trick, and Jane progresses toward graduation. As she gets closer, she uses predictive assessment software to help identify her strengths and competencies, and to help match these with skills and opportunities that are currently available in the regional job market. The system also identifies a few weak spots in her preparation, which Jane is able to address using a mix of university-provided and third-party-provided training and microcredentials. All this information was posted to her portfolio using the reliable and secure blockchain-based credentialing system, and became available to employers that were seeking to evaluate Jane and potentially make her an offer.

After graduation, Jane continued to interact with students from her alma mater both as a mentor and as a student, gaining additional credentials and experience in classes that often mixed students and professionals. As she rose in her profession, Jane also played a role in setting competency standards that were used to update the predictive assessment systems she had used as an undergraduate. However, proving that no good deed goes unpunished, Jane's presence on social media came to the attention of the predictive software used by the university's alumni and development departments, which identifies potential donors who are most likely to contribute to the school and specific programs. Given Jane's great experience as a potential student, a student and an alumnus, Jane was happy to donate.

The personalized and exemplary student experience we described for Jane is in the future, but it is a future within reach, and one for which CIOs should begin building the foundation now. At the base of this foundation is having both the right student data and a strategy that begins with an understanding of student journeys.

Core Characteristics of the Student Experience of the Future

A number of core characteristics support the future student experience:

Silo smashing: The student experience is holistic. A strategy for a better student experience requires knowledge of the student journey and an understanding of the student experience as an integrated whole, not only in terms of how the student interacts with each part of the institution, but also how he or she moves through the student life cycle. Understanding the student journey allows institutions to address chokepoints and design systems that cut across organizational silos, thereby facilitating student journeys rather than stymying them. Data is shared freely and activity is coordinated across different university divisions, thereby integrating formal and informal learning, and this happens with the growing number of education ecosystem players such that it hangs together from end to end, with services offered just in time.

Technology-enabled: Technology is a critical part of the reimagined student experience, allowing the creation of a rich experience as well as the coordination of care and service in a scalable way. CIOs need to be part of any student experience redesign or reimagining, because making technology fit after the fact will always be a mistake.¹⁰ Technologies in this scenario include virtual reality (VR), AR, robotics, CRM, Bluetooth beacons, analytics engines, microcredentials, chatbots, 3D printers, new learning spaces, guided pathway systems and more. While some of these technologies may be installed on your campus today, it is likely that most of these are yet to be explored by your institution. In turn, there is a less obvious but quite necessary underlying infrastructure, such as hybrid integration platforms, required to enable this scenario. Higher education CIOs must become familiar with these strategic technologies (see "Top 10 Strategic Technologies Impacting Higher Education in 2017") and begin pilots and experiments with them so that achieving this vision is something they can do incrementally.

Data-driven: Data feeds the systems and powers the technologies that drive personalization for students. The data is about student performance over time, about curricula and career options, and about student behavior in all parts of campus life. Data will be critical to informing and enabling differentiation and other technologies (such as CRM, VR/AR, badges and AI) that will facilitate the integration and personalization of services and experiences in a scalable way. Predictive and prescriptive analytics are used to interpret the data and offer probable outcomes and alternative courses of action to the student, faculty and administrators.

Proactive and student-controlled: Throughout this process, actions are taken proactively rather than requiring students, parents, employers or staff members to constantly work around bureaucratic processes and blockages caused by departmental silos and poorly designed workflows. There is less friction in the processes, and students have the opportunity to have greater control over the ways they interact with the institution. Where possible, data, emotions and behaviors are sensed and actions are automated to enable convenient and appropriate responses.

Personalized: A lot is being written about personalized education, most of it on the subject of learning. However, we believe that the real impact of personalization will be felt (at least initially) in changing and improving the student experience to make it more attuned to student needs and more facilitative of student success. This does not mean that institutions need a different experience or set of services for each student; however, they do need to find ways to provide students with services they need in a timely way, and in a way that is responsive to those needs. A first step is understanding that not all students are the same and designing services in a way that meets at least different groups of students' needs, rather than treating them as an undifferentiated whole. A

second step is using technology to provide more context and information to different service providers across the student life cycle (for example, using CRM), and to provide interactive service that is, in effect, more personalized through the use of technologies such as AI.

Recommendations

Higher education CIOs should:

- Focus on the student experience, not the technology. However, given the key enabling role that technology and data will play in the student experience redesign, CIOs need to be centrally involved in any student experience redesign or reimagining, because technology and data will be core components of this redesign and need to be built in from the beginning.
- Plan to use data, CRM and emerging technologies (like open digital badges and AI) to power personalization and an improved student experience without adding additional personnel (for example, by using AI-powered advising chatbots). Begin by developing a plan for the underlying data and infrastructure so that it is possible to use these technologies effectively.

Designing the New Student Experience

In designing this future student experience, higher education institutions will go through five separate stages of planning and execution.

Planning, implementation and governance: Build a governance structure to manage the process of understanding the student experience, creating a new vision for a student experience, and implementing the projects and changes needed to make the new vision a reality. This governance structure should have broad representation from many parts of campus, but must critically include, along with IT, students, faculty, admissions and the registrar's office, student affairs, and other key stakeholders. The implementation team will likely be a subset of the governance structure, but should also represent critical representative functions from major stakeholder groups.

Students are obviously key to redesigning the student experience, but keeping them engaged can be daunting, especially over multiyear projects. Find innovative ways to engage students in shorter bursts or time frames, including town hall meetings, design studios, online forums, and engaging with sororities/fraternities or other student organizations on campus.

Gather data about the current student experience: The implementation team should use both qualitative and quantitative methods to understand what the current student experience looks like on their campus, and where pain points exist. For example, in redesigning its student experience, one university conducted more than 160 hours of on-campus research, studied more than 115 reports and datasets, interviewed more than 130 staff and faculty members, and conducted more than 40 student focus groups. In order to fully comprehend the scope of the change needed, it is necessary to understand properly and in detail what the current student experience is on your campus.¹¹ As this example shows, not all the data needs to be collected fresh and specifically for this purpose. The governance and implementation teams can and should make use of data that has already been collected for other purposes (such as surveys), mining it for insights about the student experience. One area where new data is likely to be required is in soliciting student and other input into what a desirable student experience should look like.

Develop a vision for a new student experience: Using the data gathered in the previous step, CIOs and the student experience implementation team should develop a vision for a new and better student experience. This vision will be informed by the discussion among the governance and implementation teams of the implications of the data they gathered and analyzed in the previous step, as well as data gathered from students, about what an improved or ideal student experience will look like. Neither students nor their courses of study are homogeneous, so there is unlikely to be a single ideal student experience. Thus, this stage is likely to involve making some trade-offs in order to maximize the quality of student interactions with the university or college.

Identify the gaps between the current student experience and the desired future student experience: The CIO and the governance and implementation teams should use gap analysis to identify particular parts of the student experience where action needs to be taken in order to move from the current to the desired student experience. The implementation team should then develop a list or set of actions and projects that needs to be undertaken in order to address the gaps, and also develop some sense of prioritization for these because there are likely to be more gaps than can realistically be handled at one time.

Implement projects to create the new student experience, and evaluate the results: The final step in redesigning the student experience will involve implementing the projects from the previous step. Institutions have found that this stage is often iterative and that projects often require tweaks or redesigns. At every stage, it is important to evaluate the impact of the changes on the student experience by gathering and analyzing data and using it to fine-tune the project, or add additional projects.

Recommendations:

Higher education CIOs should:

- Ensure that their student experience redesign governance and implementation teams include a full cross-section of stakeholders, including students and faculty, IT staff members, and representatives from enrollment, student services and academic affairs.
- Find innovative ways to engage students in shorter bursts or time frames, including town hall meetings, design studios, online forums, and engaging with sororities/fraternities or other student organizations on campus. Students are obviously key to redesigning the student experience, but keeping them engaged can be daunting, especially over multiyear projects.
- Develop a plan for gathering data about the current student experience as a first step in redesigning the student experience of the future at your own campus. Include looking at historical data (for example, in student information systems, surveys and reports) as well as collecting new data from a variety of stakeholders.

Conclusion

The student experience of the future will be the product of an intensive redesign process based on the liberal use of data, and on utilizing technologies to bring scalable and high-touch (both human and machine) practices to make student interactions with the institution personal, integrated,

targeted and student-controlled. Failure to employ these kinds of practices — undertaken as integrated processes, and integrated with the processes of other ecosystem members across the value chain — will increasingly put universities and colleges at a disadvantage when it comes to attracting and retaining students. In fact, Gartner predicts that, by 2021, more than 30% of higher education institutions will be forced to execute on a personalization strategy to maintain student enrollment. For many institutions, this will be the difference between thriving and surviving. At the heart of this process is data and technologies, which use this data to make student interactions with the institution more personal.

Gartner Recommended Reading

Some documents may not be available as part of your current Gartner subscription.

"Industry Vision: The Fluid University Will Succeed in the Digital Business Era"

"Higher Education Analytics for Data-Driven Insight"

"Top 10 Strategic Technologies Impacting Higher Education in 2017"

"Top 10 Business Trends Impacting Higher Education in 2017"

"Visualize the Digitalized Education Ecosystem Through Digital Education Moments"

"Digital Education Moment: Tap Into the Extended Education Ecosystem to Improve the Student College Selection Process"

"Digital Education Moment: The Enrollment Opportunity"

Evidence

¹ For example, see ["New Role to Focus on Student Experience,"](#) Adelaidean; ["New Director of Student Experience Announced,"](#) University of Leicester; and ["New School Structure: Duties of the Director of Student Experience,"](#) University of Sussex.

² For example, see the ["Student Experience Redesign Project,"](#) George Mason University; ["The New U Student Experience,"](#) The University of Utah; ["Reinventing the Student Experience \(RiSE\),"](#) American University; and ["Student Strategy 2016-2020 White Paper,"](#) The University of Queensland.

³ See ["Fast Facts: Enrollment,"](#) Institute of Education Sciences (IES), National Center for Education Statistics (NCES).

⁴ For example, see ["2015-16 National Student Satisfaction and Priorities Report,"](#) Ruffalo Noel Levitz.

⁵ For example, see ["England Seeks to Measure Learning,"](#) Inside Higher Ed; and ["Performance-Based Funding for Higher Education,"](#) National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL).

⁶ For example, see ["Creating the Ideal Mason Student Experience,"](#) George Mason University.

⁷ See ["Universities in 'Dangerous' Era for Student Expectations,"](#) Times Higher Education.

⁸ See ["What a University Can Learn From Wegmans,"](#) The Chronicle of Higher Education.

⁹ See ["Student Strategy 2016-2020 White Paper,"](#) Design Principles (Page 8), The University of Queensland.

¹⁰ For example, in describing the redesign of the student experience at George Mason University, David Burge, vice president of enrollment, said they knew from the beginning that technology would be key. See the webinar ["Redesigning the Student Experience,"](#) Blackboard.

¹¹ See the webinar ["Redesigning the Student Experience,"](#) Blackboard.

More on This Topic

This is part of an in-depth collection of research. See the collection:

- [Future of Experience: A Gartner Theme Insight Report](#)

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