



# Creating a Connected Campus

How to tackle student retention and bridge the experience gap

SQUIZ

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# Higher Education Today – What’s Changed?

Entering higher education has always been both an exciting and stressful time for new students. Whether fresh from high school, returning as an adult learner or studying online, starting college or university presents students with a range of concerns; including living away from home, anxiety around tests and academic progress and post-graduation career plans. Simply financing study can present a minefield of challenges, with Bill Gates labelling the government’s financial aid system as “overly complex and confusing”.<sup>1</sup>



## 2 million

Fewer enrolments across higher education in 2019

(National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2019).



## 25%

Of students drop out before completing a four-year degree

(National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2019).



## -\$9 billion

In higher education government funding since 2008

(Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2017)

<sup>1</sup> Bill Gates: The American College Financial Aid System is Failing Students, CNBC, May 2018.



In recent years, modern students have had to face the added pressures of a struggling economy, tough job market and, in 2020, the far-reaching ramifications of a global pandemic.

*For those lucky enough to continue beyond high school education, almost every aspect of how, why and what they choose to study has changed.*

What students need and expect from their higher education experiences has transformed beyond recognition – but colleges and universities have failed to keep up and are beginning to face drastic consequences, such as a significant drop in both enrolments and retention.<sup>2</sup>

*In order to tackle declining enrolments, retention rates and meet the needs of modern students, higher education needs to completely reimagine the student experience.*

All digital transformation programs, regardless of industry, require a user-centric mindset as well as strong leadership; meaning that the role of the CIO will become vital in driving student experiences and digital offerings.

### All digital transformation programs require



<sup>2</sup> Fall 2019 Current Term Enrollment Estimates, National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, December 2019

# Retention: Higher Education's Biggest Challenge

While entering higher education has become a more difficult journey for students, institutions have also found themselves struggling to survive in an increasingly difficult and competitive environment.

Even before the pandemic hit, colleges and universities were struggling to recover from annual losses of up to \$9 billion a year in government funding<sup>3</sup>, with inevitable consequences such as being forced to cut classes and increase course prices. As Michael Barone of the Washington Examiner put it: "American higher education has been in serious trouble for the past two decades".<sup>4</sup>

In recent years, one of the most worrying trends that has stood out for higher education has been a steady decline in retention rates. In short, of those enrolling in higher education, more and more of them are dropping out before completing their degree... a staggering 25%, to be exact.<sup>5</sup>



*"Where else can we take someone's money and not guarantee them something in return? Las Vegas — and I don't think higher education wants to be compared to gambling."*

**David Laude, Professor of Chemistry,  
University of Texas at Austin**

(Washington Post, June 2018)

<sup>3</sup> A Lost Decade in Higher Education Funding, Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, August 2017.

<sup>4</sup> Colleges and Universities Threatened by COVID-19, Washington Examiner, April 2020.

<sup>5</sup> Retention of First-time Degree-seeking Undergraduates at Postsecondary Institutions 2017-2018, NCES, 2018.

# Being a Student in 2020

There are many factors that can contribute towards student drop-out rates. In recent years, some of the notable pressures include:



## The cost of study is going up, but wages are standing still

The average cost of a four-year degree more than doubled between 1986 and 2017 (from \$49,096 to \$106,372)<sup>6</sup>; but the average salaries of those that achieve a bachelors degree or higher has barely changed in almost 15 years (\$54,330 in 1995 vs \$57,920 in 2018)<sup>7</sup>. In addition, 25% of students admitted to questioning whether college is 'worth the time, money and effort'.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Tuition Costs of Colleges and Universities, National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 2019.

<sup>7</sup> Median Annual Earnings of Full-Time Workers – 1995 - 2018, NCES, 2018.

<sup>8</sup> 2020 National Freshman Motivation to Complete College Report, Ruffalo Noel Levitz, January 2020.

<sup>9</sup> Distance Education Enrolments, NCES, 2018

<sup>10</sup> Can the Universities of Today Lead Learning for Tomorrow? EY Sweeney Market Research, 2017

<sup>11</sup> Online Education Trends Report, Best Colleges, January 2020



## More students are going online, instead of on-campus

Well before the pandemic, more and more students were choosing to study online<sup>9</sup>, with recent surveys showing that the majority of students (76%) believe online courses offer a greater study/life balance.<sup>10</sup>



## Students are becoming more career-minded

Unemployment rates and stagnating salary growth are forcing students to prioritize career-paths over passion subjects. Seventy-seven percent of online students admitted to choosing a degree directly-related to their existing career or the career they plan to enter.<sup>11</sup>



### **Working through college has become the norm**

With higher education becoming increasingly unaffordable, a recent survey revealed that 83% of students are interested in courses that enable them to work and study simultaneously.<sup>12</sup>



### **COVID-19 has accelerated all of the above**

Pandemic lockdown measures forced many institutions to move to online learning, overnight – but have also had a devastating impact on the US economy and job market, creating 17% unemployment and shrinking the economy by 6.6% within a few months.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> EY Sweeney Market Research 2017

<sup>13</sup> WSJ Survey: Coronavirus to Cause 17% Unemployment, Wall Street Journal, May 2020

# Beating the Retention Trend

While the numbers around enrolment and retention rates make for grim reading, the good news is that there's a growing body of evidence to suggest that there are very clear ways in which institutions can help students to stay in college and succeed in their studies.

As mentioned, online and 'blended' learning options are gaining in popularity and institutions that invest in providing competitively priced, flexible, high-quality online courses are likely to be rewarded with higher enrolments in future.<sup>14</sup> However, arguably more important than online learning is the ability to offer students a greater sense of connection, community and engagement throughout their college or university experience.



*“Rather than trying to recreate our in-person experiences online, we should be thinking about what we can do online that expand the limits of what we can do on campus.”*

**Peter Decherney,  
Professor of Cinema & Media Studies,  
University of Pennsylvania**

(Inside Higher Ed, May 2020)

14 The Promises and Limits of Online Higher Education, American Enterprise Institute, March 2019



# Transcending Online vs On-campus

In the same way that online and offline experiences are becoming increasingly intertwined in everyday life, so too are student experiences. The reality is that, in an age where it's possible to run a small business from your smartphone, many students are unable find basic course or social group information from their own university's student portal.

## The Modern Student Experience

Regardless of whether they choose to study on-campus or online, students want to feel valued, supported and part of a community – so much so that studies have shown the level of connection a student has with peers and faculty members can directly impact the likelihood of them completing their studies:

- ▶ Students who have discussions and informal contact with faculty outside of class time are less likely to drop out of college.<sup>15</sup>
- ▶ Students who found resources unclear or difficult to access (even if when they were technically available), felt unsupported and less likely to succeed.<sup>16</sup>
- ▶ Students who were given access to consistent college coaching resources, for at least two years, were 14% more likely to remain enrolled in college a year after the coaching ended than students in a control group.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Leveraging Psychological Factors: A Necessary Component to Improving Student Outcomes, Third Way, May 2018

<sup>16</sup> Third Way, May 2018

<sup>17</sup> Third Way, May 2018



Unfortunately, many institutions are underdelivering – both online and on-campus:



## 37% of US students

found sharing and collaborating on student data ‘difficult’ or ‘very difficult’.<sup>18</sup>



## 19% of online students

felt that faculty members were responsive to their needs – and only 22% felt that feedback from tutors was ‘timely’.<sup>19</sup>



## 50% of on-campus students

feel a ‘sense of belonging’ and satisfaction with their student experience, while only 57% feel that staff ‘care about students as individuals’.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Student Success Survey, Salesforce, May 2019

<sup>19</sup> National Student Satisfaction Report 2019, Ruffalo Noel Levitz, August 2019

<sup>20</sup> Ruffalo Noel Levitz, 2019

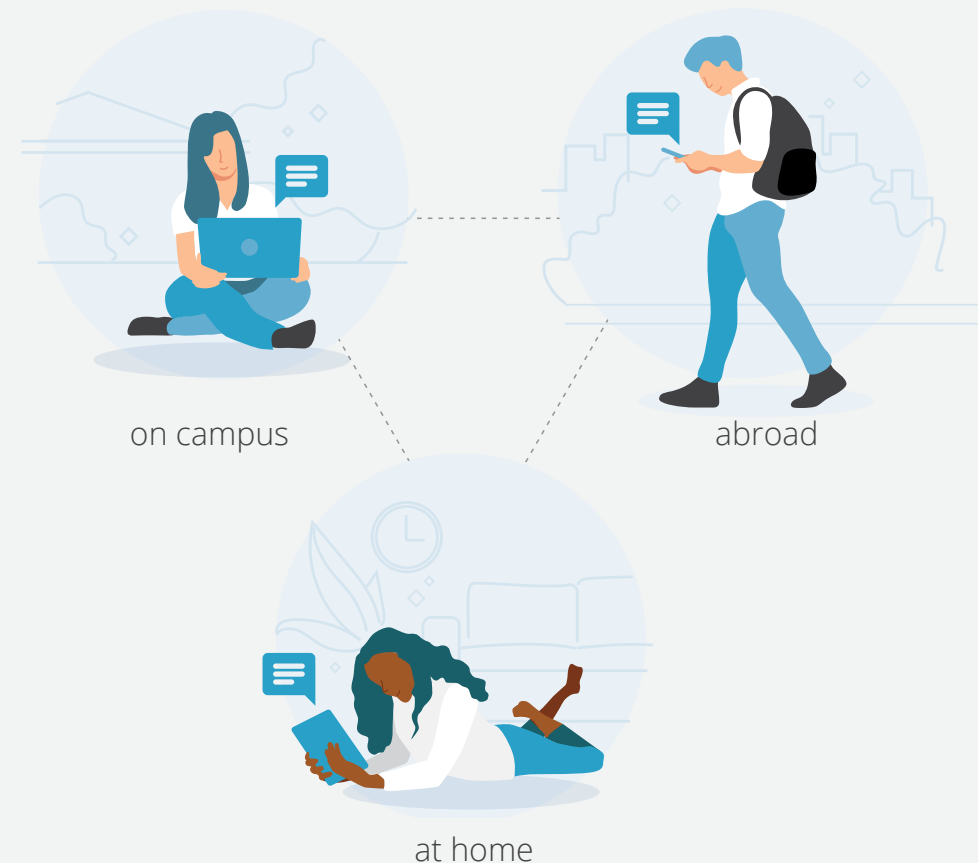
# Reimagining the Student Experience

*Connection – at every touchpoint of the student journey – is the key to a supportive, engaging experience.*

A personalized, intuitive and easy to navigate digital platform that's accessible (from anywhere at any time, on any device) is the tool that will enable colleges and universities to provide an 'always on' service to students.

While technology is only part of the solution, it can provide a crucial link between touchpoints that can optimize both online and offline experiences – whether on campus, at home or abroad. For example, in the most recent Drive Toward a Degree study, 62% of administrators and faculty advisors agreed that technology can enhance their advising and student support efforts – a key factor in retention.<sup>21</sup>

## Touchpoints



21 Driving Toward a Degree, Tyson Partners, 2019

## Role of the CIO

Leadership is a key element of any digital transformation, regardless of industry; in fact, in recent research, 70% of successful transformation project teams cited 'leaders familiar with digital technologies' as a key contributing factor.<sup>22</sup> In recent years, the role of the CIO has become increasingly crucial within higher education. As colleges and universities come under increasing pressure to provide better services with diminishing funding, technology and innovation is the clear solution, and CIOs will need to provide greater guidance and decision-making than ever before.

Not only will IT need to reposition itself as the transformation lead and center of innovation within the institution, but CIOs will be key in identifying key capabilities needed to drive the student experience forward. According to EDUCAUSE, the two most valuable contributors from technology will be:

- ▶ Applying AI and analytics to improve student outcomes and strengthen enrolment.
- ▶ The ability to enrich students' relationship with higher education, providing more valuable experiences and supporting a '60-year curriculum'.<sup>23</sup>

Colleges and universities that are ready and willing to undertake a transformation – with CIOs willing to lead change – will have a real chance of radically improving retention rates and contributing toward a brighter future for higher education.

<sup>22</sup> Unlocking Success in Digital Transformations, McKinsey, October 2018

<sup>23</sup> Top 10 IT Issues, 2020: The Drive to Digital Transformation Begins, EDUCAUSE, January 2020



# Enabling Engagement with the **Right Technology**

For universities looking to transform their online offerings and excel in student engagement, the new objective should be to create personalized, accessible online experiences – well beyond Zoom meetings and instant messaging groups. Today's students are digital natives and the expectations for their online experiences have been set by the likes of Facebook, Uber and Amazon. When it comes to delivering exceptional student experiences, universities aren't competing with each other – they're competing with the most innovative, customer-centric organizations in the world.





In order to transform student experiences, institutions need technology that will enable them to tackle the biggest challenges of student retention and engagement. Core functionality should include:

Student benefit	Implications	Digital solution
Feeling valued	In a recent survey, 64% of students listed 'personalized attention pre-enrolment' as a key influencing factor, when selecting a university. <sup>24</sup>	Personalized communications, such as targeted filters and push notifications, can provide a more relevant, tailored experience.
Visibility of academic progress	Giving students access to view their own progress will empower them to seek help when needed. Unfortunately, 32% of institutions admit that it is currently 'somewhat difficult' to access and report on student success data. <sup>25</sup>	Student success alerts and data enable greater control over academic progress, helping them to stay on track and graduate.
Connection to campus	Fostering personal connections is key. In fact, 73% of freshmen say that 'meeting new friends' is a top priority, when starting college. <sup>26</sup>	Realtime notifications, to keep students connected, socially 'in the loop' and informed about important campus updates.
Meeting digital native expectations	Modern students are digital natives. An incredible 48% of 18-29 year-olds admit to being 'online almost constantly' and have high expectations of the digital experiences offered by their colleges. <sup>27</sup>	An engaging and accessible dashboard, providing students with a centralized hub to access all key information will provide an intuitive digital experience.

<sup>24</sup> Ruffalo Noel Levitz, 2019

<sup>25</sup> Salesforce, 2019

<sup>26</sup> Ruffalo Noel Levitz, 2020

<sup>27</sup> About Three-in-ten U.S. Adults Say They Are 'Almost Constantly' Online, Pew Research Center, Feb 2017

# COVID-19: A Catalyst for Change

When the first COVID-19 cases were confirmed in the US, pandemic restrictions forced colleges to close their doors and, overnight, an estimated 14 million students across the country were left unable to physically attend classes.<sup>28</sup> Since then, institutions have been under mounting pressure – not just to deliver the bare minimum in online learning for students to complete their studies, but to provide experiences that match the in-person, on-campus experiences that students expect (and have paid for).

With an uncertain outlook ahead – both in terms of the coronavirus and economy – institutions need to invest in creating experiences that empower, support and connect students today. At a time when the value of higher education is being measured dollar for dollar, the ability to find vital information about courses, social groups and campus-wide announcement are crucial factors in determining a student's and in turn institutions success.

28 How Coronavirus Dramatically Changed College for Over 14 Million Students, CNBC, March 2020



# Creating a Connected Campus

Squiz Edify is a modern platform that enables higher education institutions to create a seamless student experience on campus, at home or abroad. Purpose built with the student lifecycle in mind, Edify makes finding information and resources easy with a connected single platform, enabling universities to create engaging and personalized experiences.

To find out more about how Squiz Edify can help higher education to tackle student retention and engagement, **visit [www.squiz.net/get/edify](http://www.squiz.net/get/edify) today.**

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