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Creating a valuable student experience
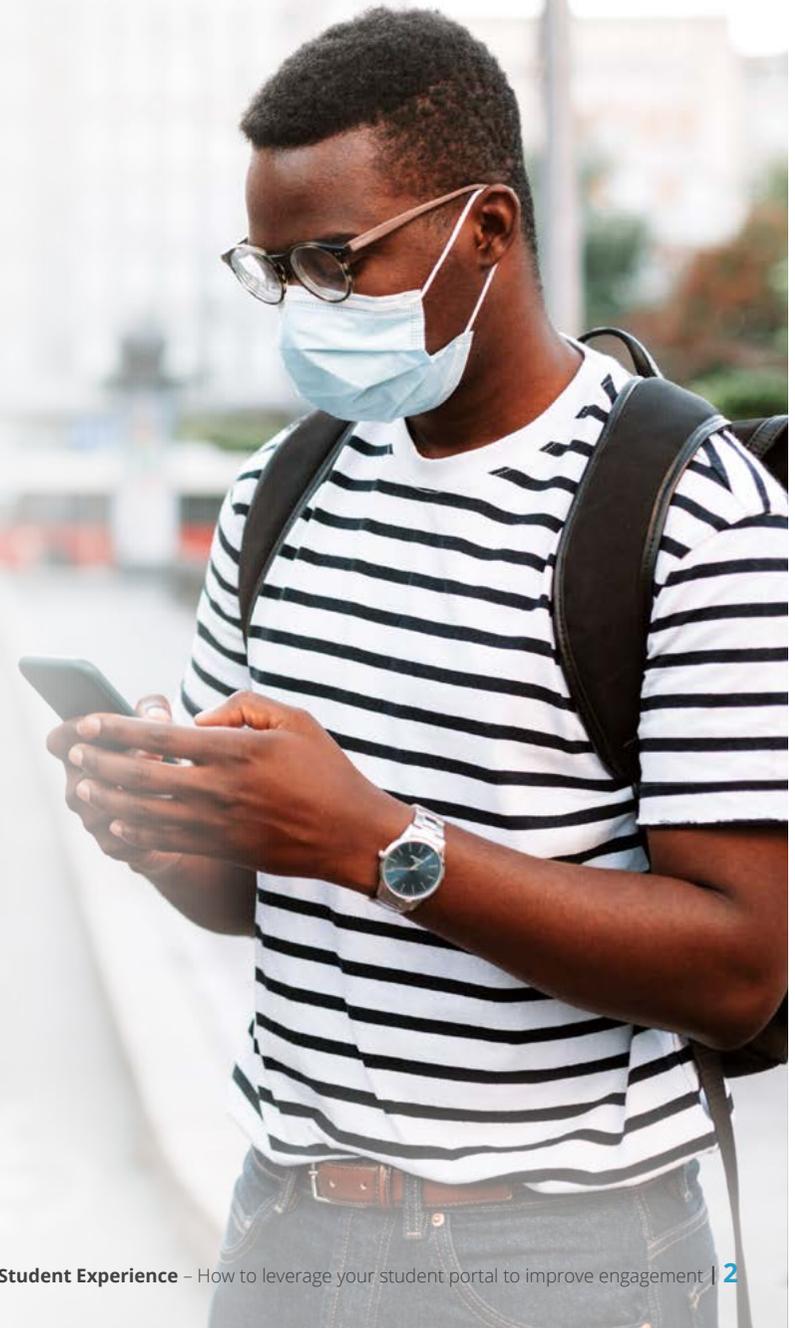
How to leverage your student portal to improve engagement

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Contents

Higher pressure

Without doubt, these are challenging times. The tumultuous events of the past year closed campuses, forcing refunds [1] and putting further pressure on strained institutional budgets [2].

Fall enrollments were lower again in 2020. Adding to the decade-long trend of declining enrolments [3]. With drop-out rates of almost 30 percent [4], there's never been more pressure to keep existing students engaged and enrolled.

Any possibility of a return to 'normal' in 2021 now seems increasingly remote.

Predictions that more than half the colleges and universities in the United States are bound for bankruptcy [5] in the next few decades [6] are looking increasingly likely.

The competition for declining enrollments [7] was already forcing colleges and universities to look closely at their student management operations. Innovative and agile institutions are focusing not only on attracting new students but increasing retention rates by putting systems in place that improve course completion and success rates.

"The institutions that thrive post-pandemic will be those that understand how humans cross the boundaries between the physical and digital — and back again." [8]

Joseph E. Aoun, President of Northeastern University

1. bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-03-12/rich-universities-scramble-with-virus-forcing-student-refunds
2. nytimes.com/2020/10/26/us/colleges-coronavirus-budget-cuts.html
3. nscresearchcenter.org/current-term-enrollment-estimates-2019/
4. collegeatlas.org/college-dropout.html
5. insidehighered.com/digital-learning/article/2017/04/28/clay-christensen-sticks-predictions-massive-college-closures
6. monitor.icef.com/2018/07/further-private-college-closures-predicted-in-us/
7. npr.org/2019/12/16/787909495/fewer-students-are-going-to-college-heres-why-that-matters
8. chronicle.com/article/how-will-the-pandemic-change-higher-education/

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Retention equals revenue

It is far more profitable to keep existing students than find new ones.[1] It can cost as much as five times as much to recruit a new student than it does to retain one that is already enrolled.[2]

Research by firms such as Ruffalo Noel Levitz shows there's a positive correlation between a good 'student experience' and both enrollment and retention. In response, higher education needs to operate as a customer-centric sector, where 'customer' means students, parents, alumni, taxpayers, and employers.[3]

And student expectations have never been so high. Focusing on staying relevant and attractive to students by delivering value centered on their experience will help the sector thrive through uncertainty and increased competition.

1. npr.org/2019/12/16/787909495/fewer-students-are-going-to-college-heres-why-that-matters
2. researchgate.net/publication/252903476_Fiscal_Benefits_of_Student_Retention_and_First-Year_Retention_Initiatives
3. forbes.com/sites/brandonbusteed/2020/09/25/wake-up-higher-education-the-degree-is-on-the-decline/

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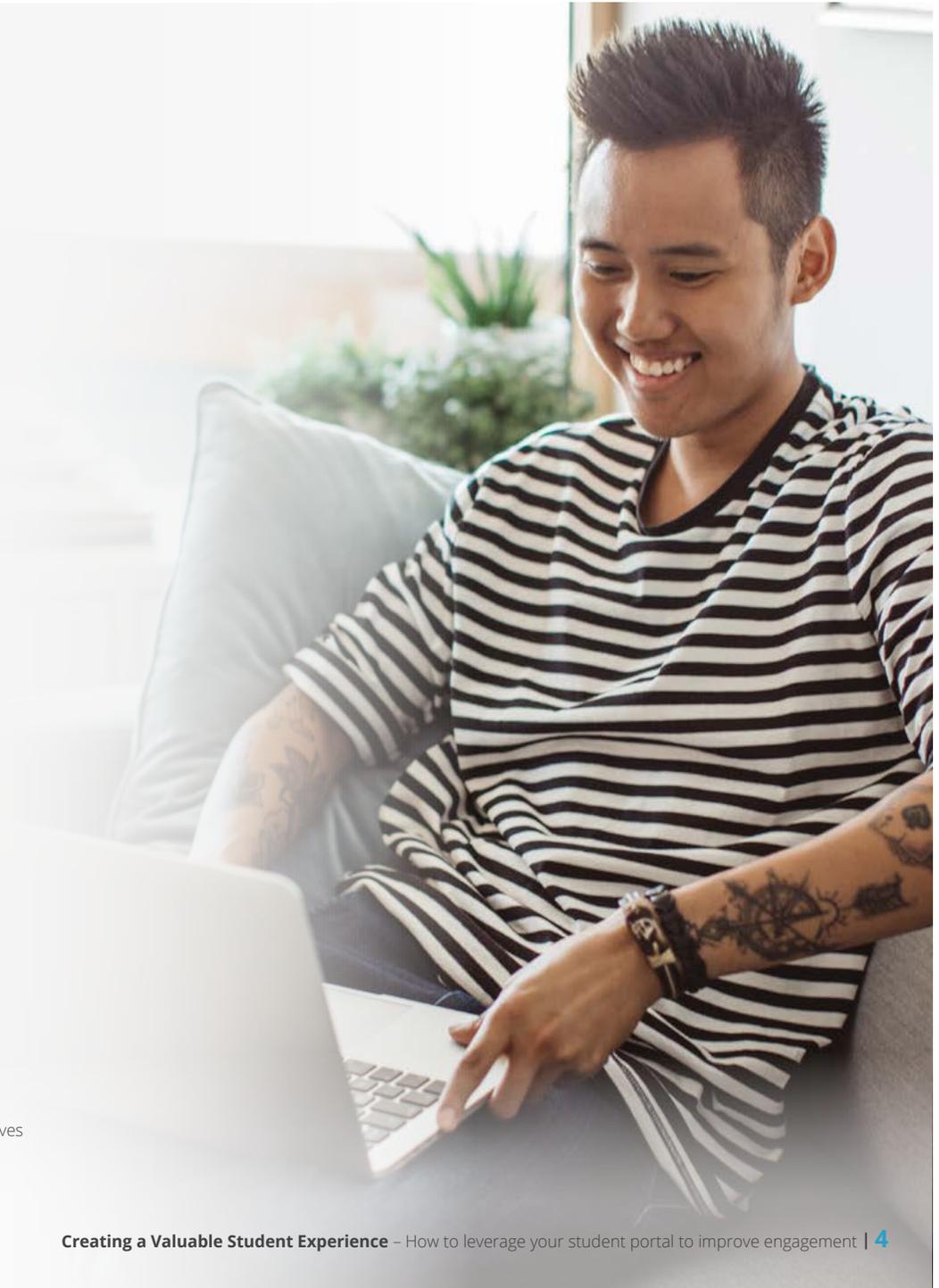
An improved 'student experience' will become a key differentiating factor, critical to both improving satisfaction and moving forward on frequently stubborn metrics like retention and graduation.

This means being proactive about delivering value in an increasingly competitive landscape exacerbated by the COVID-19 crisis.[1]

In this eBook, we look at how a new approach to the traditional student portal can help re-imagine the 'student experience' to improve completion rates while attracting and retaining students by giving them greater value in the new era of higher education.

"Positive student experiences are correlated with successful course completion, higher enrolment levels, and student retention through higher engagement levels."

Ruffalo Noel Levitz, Linking Student Satisfaction and Retention, Laurie A. Schreiner, Ph.D., Azusa Pacific University [2]

1. eab.com/insights/blogs/operations/measure-student-experience-ir/
2. learn.ruffalonl.com/rs/395-EOG-977/images/LinkingStudentSatis0809.pdf

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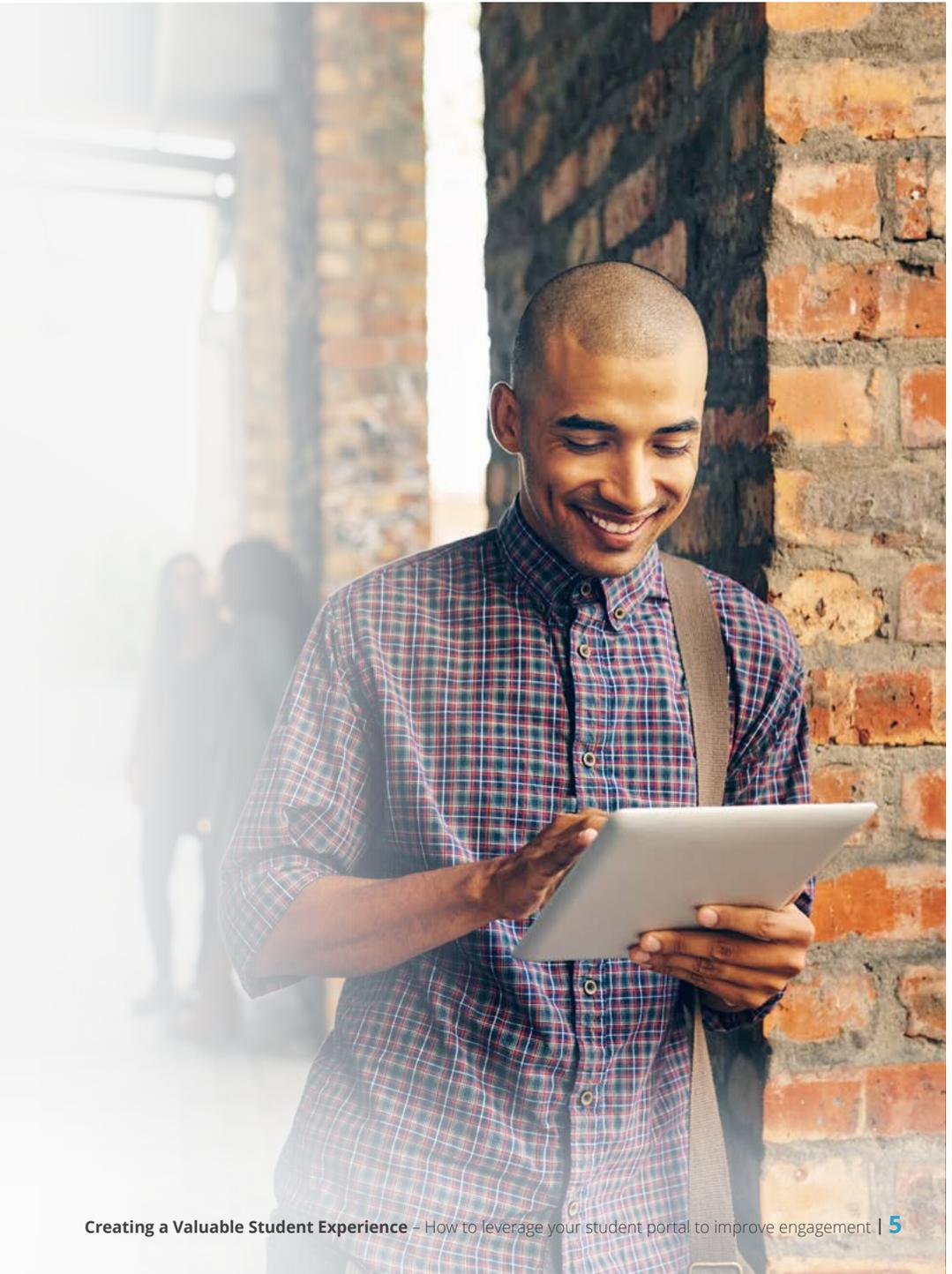
3 keys to student experience

Delivering great educational outcomes in a blended learning environment – where students not only graduate, but also get the experience they expect – is forcing a shift in mindset.

Innovative institutions are blending the physical and digital 'student experience' into a single 'user journey' with multiple touchpoints that improve accessibility while maintaining a human element.

Simplifying key tasks such as keeping up-to-date with communications, course information, or financial management, can help students feel in control and supported – and increase the likelihood they will return.

Three keys to exceptional 'Student Experience'

1 **Be Student Centric** – Understand their needs and respond.

2 **Make it Personal** – Each student is an individual that needs to connect.

3 **Streamline and simplify** – Digital natives expect seamless interaction and self-service.

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1 Create a student centric mindset

"The 'student experience' is the totality of the student's interaction with the institution, understood holistically rather than through institutional, bureaucratic or organizational silos." [1]

Leading institutions are learning from the retail and healthcare industries by adapting the idea of 'Customer Experience' for the higher ed sector. Adopting a student-centric approach puts the focus on student needs throughout the student lifecycle: From enrollment and orientation, through graduation, to alumni participation and credentials management.

The campus is no longer the singular hub of academic life, so improving the student experience must start online, by creating a service and support hub that is modern, personal, and accessible whether they are on campus, remote, or both.

1. algonquincollege.com/international/files/2017/10/the_future_of_the_student_ex_326408.pdf

STUDENT PORTAL TIP

Instead of a list of links, offer a single interface that allows students to easily interact with multiple systems without leaving:

- Learning management systems
- Student information systems
- Real-time access to calendars and timetables
- Personalized news and information feeds
- Notifications and alerts
- Online support from course advisors and campus resources
- Access to social and peer engagement

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2 Create engagement by making it personal

Starting now, institutions need to begin building a new vision for a blended learning environment that can bridge the traditional on-campus experience with the online and remote learning experience.

While there is no silver bullet to solve the retention and completion challenges, the secret sauce to 'student experience' is engagement. Improving communications and tailoring resources and services beyond the purely academic, will be the competitive edge institutions can use to thrive.

Just like on-campus students, those who choose (or are forced) to study online, still need to feel valued, supported, and part of a community – from application to alumni. Institutions that recognize this and respond appropriately, can directly impact pass / fail and retention rates.

Timely and personalized communications can cut through the noise of broadcast email, while accessible service and support offerings enable students to meet their academic and administrative needs and their relationships with educators and peers.

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

Gartner: The Future of the Student Experience is Personal [1]

1.   algonquincollege.com/international/files/2017/10/the_future_of_the_student_ex_326408.pdf

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3 Streamline and simplify

Students want to interact with their college as seamlessly as they do in their daily interactions with digital leaders such as Uber, Spotify, Instagram, or Amazon. What they need and want is a modern platform that is designed for digital natives. It needs to feel and mimic the apps and websites they are used to. That is: it needs to be intuitive, and it needs to be mobile.

Simplifying and streamlining access to information and productivity tools such as learning management systems, academic resources, financial transactions, and timetables will reduce student confusion and frustration.

How do you fit an entire campus into the palm of your hand? Search.

Leading UX research points to the effectiveness of search for reducing friction, improving accessibility, and increasing task completion online. Making the resources findable is as important as having the resources in the first place. With a search tool in your student portal, it's possible to make everything available to every student. Smart search within a student portal points to a centralized, point where students can access up-to-date information, applications, and content that is easy to find and available on-demand.

An intuitive, self-service portal that provides a single view of their relevant information and contacts will allow students to focus on their studies and increase their chances of success.

STUDENT PORTAL TIP

Make sure your platform leverages search to pull in all student resources so your students don't have to leave the app or portal in order to find what they're looking for.

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Look for outstanding solutions

Universities and colleges already have multiple systems installed. Their challenge is to create wholly new solutions, at speed [16]. A truly connected campus needs an integrated, customizable dashboard where students can seamlessly and securely access existing systems and data from anywhere, with any device, at any time.

Identifying technologies and partners that can adapt legacy applications into a new vision of a student-centric connected campus, they can unlock the potential of these existing applications to deliver innovative solutions that are quick to implement but also easy to use and maintain.

A platform solution specifically designed to improve digital experience has the benefit of building upon existing systems rather than replacing them.

Pre-built integration templates can reduce development time by connecting to and leveraging existing systems. Integration templates which are flexible and can be quickly updated to meet changing

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requirements, help ensure students always have access to real-time information and relevant services.

Look for solutions that allow administrators and non-technical staff to manage and maintain the portal. Enabling them to customize and create their own pages, a modern, intuitive platform will help staff easily meet the high expectations of digitally native students.

Machine learning and dynamic content are driving digital.

Solutions that learn and adapt to each user's needs based on their past behaviors are now easier to build and maintain.

Sophisticated search for content on both institutional systems and across the Internet allows students to easily find and access whatever they need to succeed.

Reach students in real-time with personalized and instant notifications.

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The return is retention

By choosing an industry solution that leverages existing investments in student administration and academic management systems, institutions can quickly and cost-effectively start creating an exceptional student experience.

A platform that focuses on easy integration with existing SIM, LMS, and other systems means that underlying solutions can be changed and upgraded easily without too much impact on the overall solution. Technologies that work with, rather than replacing, current systems will avoid the build-up of 'technical debt' and won't be forgotten because they were more trouble than they were worth.

In the decade prior to 2011, the biggest increase in cost per student at large research universities was not in instruction but in administration: student services, institutional support [1], research, and academic support. Today, institutions just don't have room in the budget or the calendar to be locked in to a tech behemoth.

Reducing the burden on the IT department while allowing non-technical staff to use a range of built-in features without the need for ongoing technical resources accelerates the return on investment by reducing costs.

The return on investment is measured as a positive improvement in the range of student performance indicators, such as retention and completion rates. It is these qualitative outcomes from brand advocacy built from a positive student experience that will help drive enrollments into the future.

STUDENT PORTAL TIP

Look for a student portal that focuses on integrations with your existing systems to make the most of your current tech stack and budget.

1. washingtonpost.com/opinions/four-tough-things-universities-should-do-to-rein-in-costs/2015/11/25/64fed3de-92c0-11e5-a2d6-f57908580b1f_story.html

Prepare for the future

The COVID-19 crisis presented an opportunity for innovative colleges to update their methods and operations in a way that wouldn't have been possible otherwise.[1]

But trying to replicate the campus experience online, or simply raise awareness of online alternatives is the wrong approach. Accelerating the shift to on-line or blended learning requires us to reimagine the role of the student portal that closely intertwines the human and technological aspects of education.

Start from the ground up with a mindset that treats students as customers. Build an entirely new "campus" experience that will help invigorate the student lifecycle. Ask: "Are these services actually what students want? How do they want them? How will they find them?"

Increasing engagement helps existing students stay enrolled, generates future enrollments and if done right keeps stressed administrative budgets in check.

1.   weforum.org/agenda/2020/07/these-3-key-factors-can-help-reshape-higher-ed-after-covid-19/

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