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Redesigning the Student Experience

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Introduction

Today's prospect market requires higher education institutions to change their mindsets on how they approach student recruitment and retention. This necessary paradigm shift is leading efforts to "redesign the student experience," which involves using new ways of thinking to create a consistent, cohesive, and compelling journey for students throughout the entire student lifecycle—from their first touchpoint as a prospect through graduation.

Implementing strategies that include hyper-personalization, flexibility, and design-thinking principles on campus will lead to success, while stagnation will guarantee an institution is left behind. Ultimately, redesigning the student experience requires a shift in staff mentality to one that challenges the status quo, prioritizes the student, and supports innovative thinking, strategies, and technologies.

Changing student demographics demand new perspectives

The push to redesign the student experience is a hot topic in higher education for a reason: student demographics are undeniably changing, resulting in a seismic shift in student expectations about how they are recruited and retained. The ways in which institutions approach the student journey must meet this transformation to remain relevant and competitive today.

The landscape for traditional high school graduates is changing and competition will continue to increase.
Projections over the next 15 years show a decline in the number of students age 17 - 18, meaning that this traditional pool of prospects will be smaller and even more competitive to yield. They will also be increasingly clustered in the South and West of the country, while dwindling in the Midwest and Northeast. Are you prepared for this population shift? Are you recruiting in the right regions?

Non-traditional students are the new traditional.

Seventy-four percent of students share at least one of the characteristics of a "non-traditional student." Non-traditional students are considered those over the age of 24 with one or more of the following characteristics: they wait until after high school to enroll in post-secondary education, attend college part-time while working full-time, have dependents who are not their spouse or partner, are financially independent from their parents for purposes of financial aid, or have completed their high school degree through a certificate or GED program. This is the face of the "new traditional" student. Do you understand their motivations? Are you able to support their distinctive needs?

The population of students of color and first-generation college-goers is growing.

Institutions will be catering to a student population that is increasingly diverse and representing their families as the first member to attend college. Over the next three decades, the Hispanic student population is projected to grow 174 percent, with Black and Asian student numbers also on the rise. On the other hand, white students are expected to decline in number.[1]

While the number of first-generation college-goers is increasing, many face financial, social, and academic barriers, struggle with retention, and require additional support. For instance, 20 percent of first generation college students do not consider English their first language and 75.3 percent anticipated needing to look for employment during their freshman year. Are you prepared to strongly support first-generation students? Do you have bilingual staff members to accommodate this surge in diversity?

Generation Z has greatly different expectations than Millennials. Generation Z, generally defined as those born in the mid-1990s to the early 2000s, has grown up in a world that caters to its individual likes, desires, and expectations — immediately. As digital natives, a majority of Gen Z will be connected online between <u>one hour and an incredible ten hours</u> each day. Technology like smartphones, social media platforms, and even streaming services offer immediate information, gratification, and choice, on demand. Are you delivering your information with the immediacy needed to meet Generation Z's expectations?

When it comes to finances, Gen Z and Millennials hardly resemble one another. While Millennials are characterized by the "follow your dreams no matter what" mantra, Gen Z is focused on the financial consequences of their decisions. For example, <u>a study by TD Ameritrade</u> on Gen Z revealed that 46 percent are worried about accruing student loan debt. Yet, <u>60 percent</u> of Gen Z believes that "a lot of money" is evidence of success. Does your institution offer a competitive and desirable outcome for graduates when compared to tuition costs?

Design-thinking practices to transform your team's mindset

The shift in student demographics demonstrates that the need for a highly supportive student experience — one that is personalized to the challenges, needs, and desires of prospective students — is paramount for yield and success to graduation. Design-thinking is critical in delivering on those expectations through an internal shift in your staff's mindset.

In short, design-thinking is a solution-based, human-centered approach to solving complex problems. There is more than one way to approach design-thinking, but the 5-stage model from the Institute of Design at Stanford University is a gold-standard method. Though the points below outline a linear approach, design-thinking is meant to be iterative and flexible. Knowledge gained at each step may lead back to a previous one, and so on.

01 Empathize with your prospects.

Institutions must begin the design-thinking process by truly listening and engaging with their student audience to understand their unique needs and expectations — devoid of individual assumptions or biases. When institutions develop empathy and can feel the desires of their prospects, they come from a powerful place of strength to develop solutions that actually work. Use this time to develop thorough, human-centered profiles of your target prospects.

02 Define your challenges.

Through the empathy stage, in-depth information has been gathered on what motivates or hinders target prospects. Now, the focus shifts to defining challenges with a problem statement based on organizing, synthesizing, and simplifying that information. The statement should not deal with your institution's goals, but instead, be human-centered and focused on solving the problems of your prospects. For example, instead of a problem statement like, "We need to increase our market share of students from the West by 10 percent," you should reframe the problem based on the needs of those particular students. Your new problem statement based on these ideals would look something like, "Students in the West need more financial aid and targeted communications in order to yield at our institution."

03

Ideate on solutions.

This is the time for brainstorming and creativity within the team. Problems have been successfully identified based on empathetic engagement with prospects, and now you can uncover innovative ways to solve them. In this phase, there are no bad ideas! Generate as many ideas as possible and they will likely start to shift and change into others as the process unfolds. While there is no wrong way to generate ideas, it is highly encouraged to make them visual: write on whiteboards, sticky-note the office, or draw them out on large poster-boards. When stuck, get creative. Stanford recommends techniques like: "breaking the law" (are there any constraints you can break through?); comparing the problem to other real-world examples; continuing to ask 'how and why?'; emulating ideas from other successful institutions; and inverting the problem to see if it sparks more ideas. From there, your team can narrow all of its ideas down to the most promising.

04

Prototype the best ideas.

Now, it's time to design prototypes of the best solutions generated during the ideation stage through inexpensive, scaled-down experiments. Use staff or a select, small group of prospects as a testing pool. The prototype period is the perfect time to troubleshoot problems and spark new and better ideas with an additional layer of feedback.

05

Test, redefine, and deploy with prospects.

At this point, there should be confidence that prospects have been thoroughly and accurately identified, and corresponding profiles have been developed based on empathetic engagement with their challenges and desires. Ideation on solutions drawn from human-centered motivations is complete, and the best solutions generated have been tested on a small scale. However, ongoing experimentation doesn't end here — this just means you are ready to begin deploying the solutions that tested best with prospects. Continue to evolve and fine-tune your profiles and processes to keep up with changing needs and desires of target prospects.

All in all, design-thinking will help institutions create a seamless student experience that is based on a deep understanding of each student's individual motivations and challenges. This can mean all the difference between yielding and retaining a student, or losing them to forces like another institution, summer melt, or struggles during matriculation. A supportive, well-designed student experience includes strategies like personalized communications, effective and relevant visuals and interfaces, and frequent interactions, which translate to satisfied students who feel understood and championed by their institution.

"The student experience doesn't start when students set foot on your campus for the first time, it starts the minute they receive a communication from your institution. Too often, we forget that the digital experience is just as important to students as their physical experience."

—

Jay Murray
Associate Vice President for Enrollment Services
Western Connecticut State University
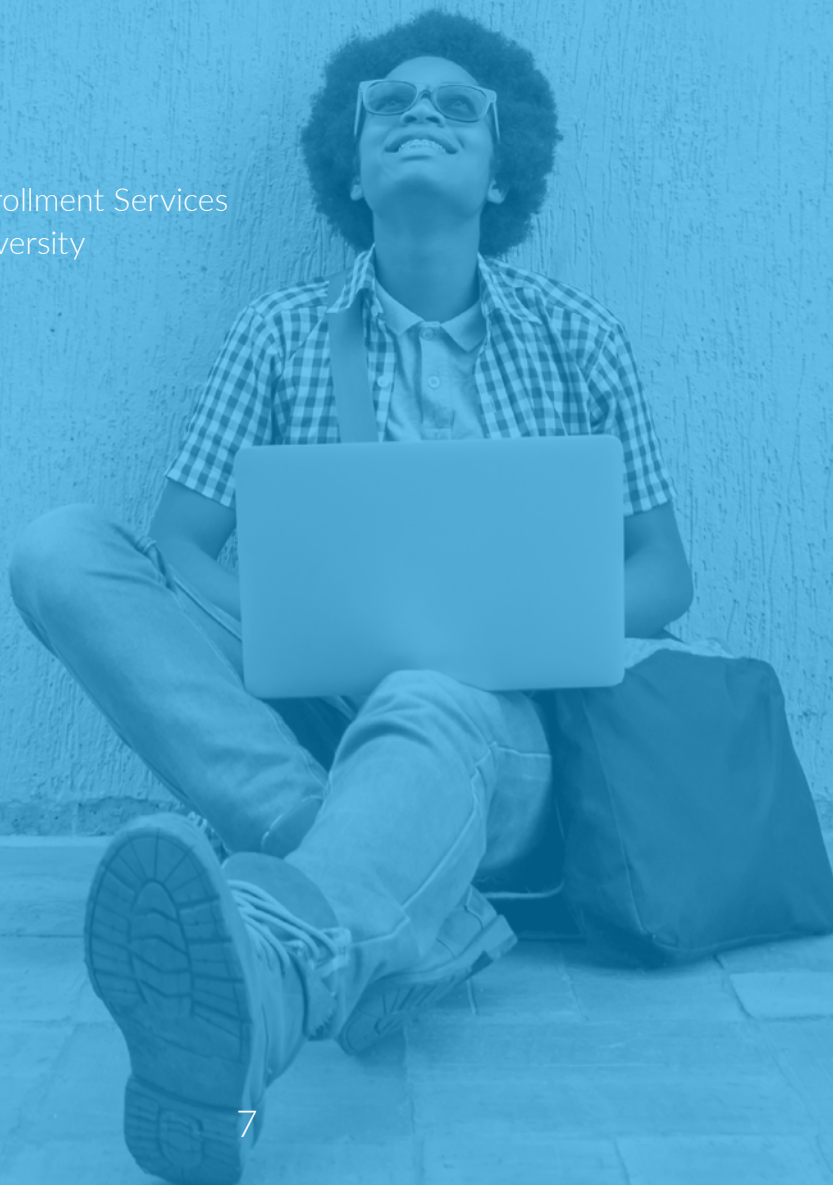
7 truths and tips to redesign the student experience

We've already explored various strategies to flip existing teams' mindsets and generate more innovative, student-centered ideas. Now, here are a few tips to start reimagining students' digital experiences with your institution today.

Truth #1: Data and analytics are an institution's best friend.

Use an integrated CRM with robust reporting and analytics on who, when, and how prospects are engaging with your institution's website, videos, emails, blogs, social media, live chats, and text messaging. Endless Excel spreadsheets and messy pivot tables are a thing of the past — upgrade staff's reporting functionality to discover new insights that lead to tangible results within admissions and student success. This will strengthen the marketing department's ability to target resources towards what is actually working and cut what isn't, while impressing leadership with real-time reports on growth and overall successes.

Truth #2: Settling for a mobile-friendly digital experience is no longer cutting it.

Nearly 8 in 10 millennials are logging into four or more digital platforms per day. Plus, 85 percent say that mobile devices are a central part of everyday life, and 91 percent of mobile users say access to content any way they want it is important to them.[2] This means that digital mobility, accessibility, and superior design matter. Instead of simply meeting students where they are, the institutions that create their digital experience in anticipation of where students will be are at an absolute advantage. Being mobile-first, and not just mobile-friendly, will set your institution apart and create a truly seamless, cross-platform experience for students.

Truth #3: Centralized student information enables greater personalization.

Leverage a CRM that centralizes and simplifies student information and touchpoints so that staff understand each prospects' level of engagement and individual interests at the touch of a button. Even better, leverage a CRM that can segment those students based on their likelihood to yield with prospect scorecards. Many schools will "customize" their outbound communication to prospects by

inserting {{first name}} or {{major}} variables, and that's the extent of it. Gather and track unique student attributes on a student's record, with the help of a CRM, to break through the clutter with hyper-personalized outreach.

From there, ensure student success through graduation with the ability to track and identify at-risk students and visualize data on an intuitive dashboard. This will allow your institution to maintain a proactive, rather than reactive, approach to retention from the moment a student enrolls.

Truth #4: Slow RFIs do more harm than good.

Today's prospects want fast information that speaks to them personally. In fact, 60 percent of students want a response to requests for information within 24 hours, and 9 out of 10 students want that outreach customized to them.[3] If your institution can't deliver on that timeframe or requires a long inquiry form that students don't have the patience to fill out, RFIs are hurting your bottom line.

Truth #5: Live chat features work.

Oftentimes, if prospects don't find answers immediately, they move on. That's why the immediacy of live chat features is so successful. In fact, a Zendesk Benchmark report found that people who "choose live chat for customer service are satisfied a higher percentage of the time than those who call, email, or use social media channels." Empower your counselors and advisors to get back to the business of connecting with students and solving complex problems by allowing a live chat feature to eliminate the repetitive, mundane questions received on a daily basis.

Truth #6: Mobile apps help create an engaged, unified student body that stays.

Combat summer melt and other common retention challenges by leveraging a university-branded mobile app that allows accepted students to connect with one another, and multiple campus offices, in real time. In fact, research shows that if a student has connections with 9 or more students after being admitted, they are 93 percent more likely to attend an institution.[4] This is a powerful way to build an engaged student community and foster ongoing institutional loyalty.

Truth #7: Students want you to text them.

Most people today have long relied on email, text messaging, or social media to reach others in their daily lives. Over the past decade, these technologies have welcomed a new era of communication and standards. Two-thirds of students indicate that they would be willing to receive a text message from a prospective college, yet few actually do.[5] Texting students can be extremely effective for deadline-driven initiatives like applications or financial aid packages, and even appointment or event reminders. Take the competitive advantage by being the institution that listens to students' preferences and texts them.

"Retention has become a national issue because most campuses are unable to see the signs that a student is struggling. It's time for institutions to identify and truly understand their students' needs in order to get them back on the right path. With the holistic view of a student's record our CRM provides, we can be proactive rather than reactive."

Hamid Etesamnia

Chief Information Officer
Brandman University

Communicate seamlessly with the right support tools

To successfully redesign the student experience, institutions must create a seamless, cross-platform environment that delivers information when and where students desire — without bouncing them around to various offices and representatives. (Today's digital-native students will accept nothing less!) In fact, 83 percent of mobile users say that a seamless experience across all devices is "very important" to them.

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Ensure your website is optimized for mobile and your applications are mobile-first.

- <u>97%</u> of undergrads own a smartphone

- <u>47%</u> rate smartphones as "very or extremely important" to academic success

- <u>8 in 10 students</u> visit a college website from their mobile device

- 76% of them indicate the experience as "ok" or "challenging"[6]

- 76% of students completed some portion of their admissions application on a mobile device[7]

- 13% of students actually completed the application on their mobile device[8]

TAKEAWAY:

Students are moving further away from desktops and turning to mobile for all of their internet-based needs. In fact, only <u>29 percent</u> of undergrads own a desktop. Ensure that the student experience you create translates seamlessly from your institution's website to a student's smart-phone or tablet. This takes more than simply scaling your website and application to fit smaller screens. Speed, accessibility, and design matter — the student experience should never feel disjointed or difficult to navigate.

Smartphone users are extremely active, but their attention spans are short and content is competitive.

- Smartphone users go online with their mobile devices an average 150 times a day

- Smartphone sessions are 1.5 times shorter than other devices

- Delays in being able to access mobile content causes users' heart rates to rise an average of 38%

TAKEAWAY:

You are competing with an avalanche of information that is constantly delivered into the palm of a prospect's hand. To stand out from the crowd, emails and content need to be hyper-tailored, relevant, and accessible. Speak to who individual prospects are and strive to solve their unique pain points. To address declining attention spans, optimize your online forms so that students see value immediately and will therefore be more likely to complete them. Shorten the length of your RFIs and event registration pages or use conditional fields and you will see much greater conversions from mobile.

Prioritize accessible mobile emails and time them strategically.

- Email is the most popular activity on smartphones among users ages 18-44

- Over 50% of smartphone users grab their smartphone immediately after waking up

- Mobile email opens have grown by 180% in the last three years

- Email marketing has an ROI of 4,300%

TAKEAWAY:

Keep timing in mind when scheduling content or sending emails. The morning is a critical time to connect with prospects and current students alike. Hyper-personalize your content beyond the standard "First Name" and "Major" fields, and make sure your institution is sending mobile-first HTML emails. Thoughtful, engaging, well-timed emails can make all the difference with both target prospects and at-risk students.

Remember, always put students first

Ultimately, redesigning the student experience means prioritizing students by employing a top-down approach to recruitment and keeping the end in mind. Simply adopting new technologies and implementing innovative tactics will not cut it. Successfully redesigning the student experience requires institutions to adopt a strategic paradigm shift in addition to upgrading technology.

Use design-thinking foundations to spark new ideas and strategies that are student-centered. Be open to iteration and improvement on those ideas and strategies. Implement new solutions with the help of the technology tools that make the student experience seamless and hyper-personalization possible. Waiting around for others to take initiative will hinder your potential to make a huge difference on your campus; start with a small, tangible change that enhances the student experience and is in your control. It only takes one person to begin the process toward better outcomes for today's students, and there's no reason why that person can't be you.

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citation & sources

TargetX (2018). E-book: Redesigning the Student Experience. Retrieved from targetx.com/student-experience

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About TargetX

Student-centric solutions for higher ed.

While it takes a major paradigm shift to truly redesign the student experience, you also need technology that puts the student experience first. At TargetX we've built all of our solutions with students in mind, from our Online Application built with the mobile experience in mind, to dynamic student Portals and seamless event registration — all managed in a comprehensive CRM.

Increase enrollment and ensure student success with TargetX's technology solutions, built on the Salesforce platform and designed specifically for higher ed.

Ready to redesign the student experience?

>> Let's Get Started

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Student Experience

Learn more at:
targetx.com/research

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