Personalizing
Students' Educational Journey

INSIDE HIGHER ED

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From retail to healthcare to entertainment, today we experience and expect more personalized interactions in our day-to-day lives than ever before. It began with the digitization of online shopping, fueling a rise in both individual and aggregated data use to customize and enhance the experience. Today that critical mass of data powers proactive nudges, purchase suggestions based on past shopping habits, and push notifications to buy more milk before you run out. Healthcare and entertainment experienced similar journeys to personalization.

But education has been on a different path. While we've come a long way from the traditional experience in education, why hasn't education kept pace with the shift to customized experiences that other industries achieved? The common driver that we see in other industries is a critical mass of users engaging consistently on a digital platform, enabling data to be securely harnessed with appropriate privacy protections. Education didn't experience the massive digital engagement that transformed other industries until the events of 2020.

The massive shift to online learning driven by the COVID-19 global pandemic enabled continuity of education in the near term, while opening the door for education to move forward on a journey toward more personalized experiences. No one knows exactly how this will evolve in education over the next decade. Education is unique, as is every place of learning around the world. But at Blackboard, we're ready to embark on that journey to personalization together with you.

We've had our sights set on the future for the past few years and have the ability to securely harness data, with robust privacy protections, from across our ecosystem of EdTech solutions with the specific intent of enabling personalized experiences to drive improved outcomes.

Students need nudges, outreach and access to solutions that help them stay on track, from enrollment through graduation. Younger students need parents not just to be informed, but to be engaged.

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At Blackboard our thinking, investments and technology development have been singularly focused on enabling increasingly personalized user experiences, fueled by data, to advance learning and drive better outcomes for students, educators and institutions. It's exciting to think about the possibilities, and we're excited to bring them to life with you.

Bill Ballhaus

Chairman, CEO & President
Blackboard

Introduction

Every student is different.

That reality became more apparent as COVID-19 forced campuses to disperse and gave college instructors and administrators significantly more windows into students' lives and widely varying circumstances.

A professor learns something about a student who walks into the classroom at the top of the hour and out 50 minutes later. But that may pale in comparison to the insights gleaned from digital interactions – especially when those interactions give instructors not only what they see and hear, but rich data that can help them understand and tailor learning and support to students based on their situations and needs.

From the moment students contemplate attending a college or university through the moment they complete their academic program – and possibly beyond – they are on a journey that is unlike anyone else's.

The days when students were solely responsible for navigating that path themselves are past, with institutions increasingly held responsible for whether students succeed or not. To help them, colleges and universities are tapping all the tools at their disposal to give each student the right support at the right time.

The articles in this compilation explore some of the strategies colleges are undertaking to help students navigate enrolling, choosing an academic path, staying on track academically and otherwise, and ultimately finding their place in the workforce and society. Among other topics, the articles explore how tutoring support morphed when campus offices closed due to the pandemic; the role automation can play in providing targeted academic and student services, through "nudges" and other tactics; and students' expectations for virtual learning in the years ahead.

Inside Higher Ed will continue to track these important issues in the months ahead. Please reach out to us if you have questions about this booklet or topics you suggest we explore.

Thank you, and stay well.

–The Editors
editor@insidehighered.com

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NEWS

Shifting Focus From Access to Completion

President Biden's proposal to invest $62 billion in student success represents a shift in federal higher education policy.

By Alexis Gravely // May 3, 2021

Details surrounding President Biden's proposed investment of $62 billion to support student completion and retention in higher education are scarce, but experts say there's potential for the program to be the most transformative of the administration's postsecondary proposals.

The grant program would offer funding to colleges and universities that serve high numbers of low-income students, particularly community colleges, to adopt success solutions that help students stay enrolled and earn a degree.

"This, to me, seems like the most revolutionary and has the most potential to really address equity gaps and get resources to schools and students that need them the most and that haven't gotten them historically," said Amy Laitinen, director for higher education at New America.

The $62 billion proposal is a part of Biden's American Families Plan, released last week, which includes a total of $290 billion in higher education spending to offer tuition-free community college, support for historically Black colleges and other minority-serving institutions, and increased Pell Grant awards. According to a fact sheet for the plan, states, territories and tribes would receive grant funding to allocate to colleges "that adopt innovative, proven solutions for student success," including wraparound services, emergency basic needs grants and transfer agreements between colleges.

PEOPLEIMAGES/GETTY IMAGES

The student success proposal represents a partial shift in focus at the federal level – from helping students access and afford college to now helping students stay in and complete college, said Tamara Hiler, director of education at Third Way.

"Unlike in K-12, we do very little at the federal level in higher education to recognize and reward institutions that are taking in either an above-average share of Pell students or underserved populations and providing them additional resources and capacity to help them improve student success," Hiler said.

Inequities persist in college completion for low-income students and students of color, said Mamie Voight, interim president at the Institute for Higher Education Policy. And the myriad reasons that students leave college – from work obligations to the lack of availability of required courses – often weigh unequally on students, she said.

"The programs and practices that receive investment through this program should combat racial and economic disparities in college completion and degree attainment, be responsive to the needs and experiences of each institution and the students they serve, and account for the critical role of data in addressing inequities," Voight said.

The City University of New York's Accelerated Study in Associate Programs, or ASAP, is a gold standard example of the type of initiatives that the $62 billion investment could fund, according to Hiler and Laitinen.

"It has probably the most dramatic increases in completion and retention that we've seen from an intervention," Laitinen said.

CUNY's ASAP offers a number of supports to the community college students it serves, including free public transportation, assistance with the cost of textbooks, a dedicated adviser from enrollment to graduation and special class registration options, among others. Recent data show that students in ASAP are twice as likely to graduate in three years, compared to those who aren't in the program.

"It's those types of small interventions that can make a really big difference in a student's ultimate ability to graduate," Hiler said.

The structure of Biden's proposed grant program could potentially look similar to one from the secondary level in the creation of a "Title I for higher education" – a reference to the federal aid program for K-12 schools created by the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 – which Third Way proposed in 2018. That could mean the federal government would provide resources to states, and states would then use those resources to supplement institutional funding at colleges based on the student populations they serve, said Hiler.

The America's College Promise Act, led by Democratic senator Tammy Baldwin of Wisconsin and Democratic representative Andy Levin of Michigan – which some are saying could be the blueprint for Biden's free community college plan – also includes provisions that would create a federal Student Success Fund.

The legislation would provide federal grant money to states and Native American tribes to improve student outcomes based on a formula developed by the secretary of education. In the first four years of the program, states and tribes would have to match 25 percent of the funding received from the federal government, with that amount increasing over time. The legislation also includes a provision mandating that the grant funds are a "supplement, not supplant," which Laitinen said is a critical part of the design of the Biden grant program.

"This is a lot of money, and we need to make sure that states don't use this as an excuse to back out their appropriations," Laitinen said. "They need a good, robust, well-funded, well-supported office of enforcement that makes sure that these funds aren't supplanting other funds."

Over all, Laitinen said it's important for the design of the program to be targeted, rather than allowing states and institutions to simply fill out a blank check.

"While $62 billion is a lot, if you spend it on anything and everything and not on evidence-based practices that help particular communities, then you're not going to end up moving the needle on equity," Laitinen said. "If we're going to make this investment, we've got to make it count." ■

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As Students Dispersed, Tutoring Services Adapted

With the pandemic limiting face-to-face interaction, universities turned to new virtual peer tutoring pathways that save money and can offer sessions at any time of day. But are students booking as many sessions and getting the academic help they need?

By Greta Anderson // March 16, 2021

COURTESY OF WELLESLEY COLLEGE

Roberta Schotka (center left), who oversees peer tutoring services at Wellesley College, trains peer educators at the Pforzheimer Learning and Teaching Center.

As the coronavirus pandemic forced college campuses to shut down last March, Tiana Iruoje scrambled to quickly transition peer tutoring services at Indiana University's Luddy School of Informatics, Computing and Engineering to online-only appointments.

Iruoje, director of student engagement and success for the school, needed to be able to track student check-ins and tutor hours. She nearly hired a computer science student to develop from scratch a system that could do so.

"The time and resources we would've spent to have him do it were outrageous," she said.

Student tutors are typically available to Luddy students for walk-in sessions most weekday evenings. The tutors sit and wait at tables in a classroom with placards denoting their majors placed in front of them so "clients" – students seeking tutoring – can find the appropriate tutor to work with, Iruoje said. It's a valuable service for students studying difficult technology and engineering subjects, but with the physical tutoring space closed and then reopened only for limited use during the pandemic, Iruoje and the center's staff needed to be flexible and creative.

Learning center staff members across the country faced a similar dilemma. Just as faculty members and mental health support staff members were forced to pivot to remote instruction and online therapy sessions within a matter of weeks, academic support services also quickly shifted gears and made accommodations for the public

health emergency. Very few centers had existing online systems established to smoothly transition their traditional, brick-and-mortar centers to online peer tutoring sessions. Tutors also weren't trained to work in that format, said Roberta Schotka, director of programs at the Pforzheimer Learning and Teaching Center at Wellesley College in Massachusetts.

"It was a steep learning curve for everybody," said Schotka, certifications director for the College Reading and Learning Association, or CRLA, a national membership group of academic support professionals that establishes benchmarks and guidelines for tutor training programs and has certified more than 1,200 programs worldwide.

Some institutions, such as the Luddy School, turned to for-profit, third-party companies that provide software for learning center management and an online platform for tutoring sessions. Executives at the companies said their services are being requested more often – and have experienced massive increases in use since the pandemic was declared. They promote their products as an all-in-one solution for colleges and universities aiming to expand the reach of their peer tutoring services, which experts say have the potential to increase students' grades and graduation rates.

But the companies mostly rely on the labor of students hired by their institutions to provide academic help to other students. Learning center directors worried the tutors would step away from their jobs, said Jon Mladic, director of professional development for CRLA. After all, the tutors are students first, and they were experiencing their own uncertainty, adjustments and personal challenges caused by the pandemic, he said.

> "Tutors become more confident in expressing themselves to other people, and there are other benefits we assume they will accrue: conscientiousness and the ability to work with a person who's very different from oneself."

Mladic, who is also dean of library and learning services at Rasmussen University in Illinois, said stories from learning centers around the country proved the opposite. As the pandemic caused poor academic outcomes for students during the spring and fall 2020 semesters, tutors, who tend to be high-achieving students, were willing to continue and in some cases increase the level of academic support they provided their peers, he said.

"It's been incredibly heartwarming to hear about programs where peer tutors stepped up," Mladic said. "It was an incredibly selfless act in the moment, and it really made the difference for many programs."

'Educationally Purposeful Peer Interactions'

The level of support and social interaction peer tutors provide to other students is especially important during the pandemic, when students are more likely to be isolated and lacking connection to their institutions, said George Kuh, chancellor's professor of higher education emeritus at Indiana University and a nationally recognized student engagement and success expert.

Kuh considers peer tutoring an "educationally purposeful peer interaction" – activities designed for students to work both academically and socially with one another. Positive indicators and anecdotal data suggest that scaling up structured peer tutoring services at institutions can boost student engagement and, as a result, retention rates, he said.

First-year students who say their colleges provide "quite a bit" or "very much" academic support in general are more likely to want to return to their institution the following year, according to recent results from the National Survey of Student Engagement, or NSSE. The annual survey of thousands of undergraduates is a project of the

[First-year students are more likely to intend to return to institutions that emphasize academic and learning support]

Data from 2019 and 2020 combined NSSE file.

		How much does the institution emphasize providing support to help students succeed academically?		How much does the institution emphasize using learning support services (tutoring, writing center, etc.)?	
Student: Do you intend to return to this institution next year?		**Very little/Some**	**Quite a bit/Very much**	**Very little/Some**	**Quite a bit/Very much**
No	Count	3,548	4,431	3,229	4,761
	Percent	7.6%	3.1%	7.3%	3.3%
Yes	Count	37,214	130,361	35,891	131,779
	Percent	79.5%	90.8%	80.9%	90.2%
Not Sure	Count	6,041	8,790	5,245	9,586
	Percent	12.9%	6.1%	11.8%	6.6%

Data provided by Robert M. Gonyea, associate director, research and data analysis, Center for Postsecondary Research, Indiana University Bloomington School of Education

Table: Rick Seltzer, Inside Higher Ed • Source: National Survey of Student Engagement • Get the data • Created with Datawrapper

Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research, which Kuh founded.

Ninety percent of first-year students who said their college emphasized using learning support services, such as tutoring or writing centers, also said they intended to return the following year, according to 2019 and 2020 NSSE data provided by Robert Gonyea, associate director of the IU Center for Postsecondary Research. About 10 percent fewer first-year students said they intended to return if their college provided "very little" or "some" emphasis on learning support services, Gonyea's analysis showed.

However, peer tutoring is not officially labeled a high-impact practice, a set of student engagement and learning strategies approved and promoted by the Association of American Colleges and Universities that are proven to improve students' grades and increase persistence and graduation rates. The current list of 11 such practices includes first-year seminars and living-learning communities. But Kuh said the success of peer tutoring specifically has not yet been proven through widespread research. He's hoping that will change and believes peer tutoring not only helps the student being tutored but can help tutors develop career skills that employers emphasize in their searches.

"Tutors become more confident in expressing themselves to other people, and there are other benefits

we assume they will accrue: conscientiousness and the ability to work with a person who's very different from oneself," he said. "These are all qualities that employers say are essential."

However, peer tutoring services have also been difficult for institutions to scale, especially large, public universities with thousands of students and various degree programs and curricula that students need help with, Kuh said. Officials at many colleges know their services aren't reaching "nearly as many students as could benefit from peer tutoring," but they can't afford to simply hire more tutors and build more spaces for tutoring to solve the problem, he said.

This is where ed-tech companies that manage and deliver tutoring services directly to students can be a big help, Kuh said.

Potential Third-Party Solutions

Mladic, of the CRLA, said that as many colleges shut down their centers for in-person services during the pandemic, they also quickly contracted with third-party companies to outsource academic support. Administrators who contract with and are proponents of the companies said they have helped expand peer tutoring services on their campuses while also cutting costs.

Iruoje, at the Luddy School at Indiana University, signed a yearlong $10,000 contract with Knack, a company that connects students with tutors through an application available on a computer, smartphone or other device. The Florida-based company currently also has contracts with the University of Florida, Florida A&M University and about two dozen other institutions, said Samyr Qureshi, co-founder and CEO of Knack.

> "Suddenly, with COVID, everyone became a distance learning student. Students suddenly placed in five courses that started out face-to-face and suddenly were all online were desperately struggling to figure out how to survive in that online environment."

Knack offers to manage most aspects of a traditional tutoring center, such as hiring and training tutors, tracking their hours, and providing a platform for tutors and student clients to message and work with one another over video or in person, Qureshi said. Students can search for tutors at their college or university based on the specific class they need help with and at any time of day, whereas traditional campus learning centers are open for specified hours each day.

Deals between Knack and institutions range in scale and size. For example, the University of Florida has a $540,000 contract with Knack lasting through the spring 2021 semester to provide tutoring services at no charge to some students. The services are available to low-income students enrolled in courses from which students most often withdraw or fail. Florida A&M, a historically Black university that enrolls about 70 percent Pell-eligible students, decided to provide Knack's services at no charge to all of its students, Qureshi said.

Jorge Del'Angel, a senior at Florida A&M who tutors through Knack and also at a center in the university's College of Engineering, said the online platform has allowed him to reach and support more students. Since the platform launched at the university nearly two years ago, Del'Angel has had 130 tutoring sessions with 43 different students, he said. He focuses on introductory classes for biological and agricultural systems engineering students that many tend to fail, such as chemistry and physics. It's been fulfilling for Del'Angel to help others in classes he also once struggled with, he said.

"If I've been through the storm already and I can help someone who's

just starting to go through it, that makes it all better," Del'Angel said.

Helping other students with these courses has also ingrained introductory material and concepts in his mind, which is helpful now that he's taking advanced courses.

"It's not just a one-way street of me helping someone else. They help me, too," Del'Angel said.

In fall 2019, Florida A&M hired 76 tutors for 133 courses, and by the end of the semester it had provided nearly 1,000 total tutoring hours, according to a case study that Knack conducted at the university. Qureshi said that from 2019 to 2020, overall Knack users grew by 347 percent and the average student who sought tutoring through the platform during fall 2020 used it about four times, or about once each month. He declined to provide exact usage and session numbers, citing competitive risk for the company.

Iruoje said she was initially hesitant about outsourcing the Luddy School's tutoring services to a third-party company. But the partnership saved the school more than $42,000 in tutoring costs in 2020, mostly because the peer tutors were no longer being paid to sit in classrooms and wait for students to seek help. Knack allows for both the students and tutors to work together on their own schedules, whereas previously the peer tutors would get frustrated when students weren't coming in for help, Iruoje said.

"It didn't only save dollars, it also saved my time," she said. "I can focus on other student engagement activities for the whole school on a larger scale, not just focusing on clocking tutors in and clocking out."

> If I've been through the storm already and I can help someone who's ust starting to go through it, that makes it all better.

Luddy School students who received tutoring via Knack during fall 2020 had a 2 percent higher persistence rate going into the spring 2021 semester than those who did not use Knack tutoring, according to data provided by Iruoje.

The difference "seems small at first glance," she said. "Even so, the results are positive and promising."

Schotka said Knack is one of three corporate partners associated with CRLA that have developed a tutoring platform or training program to assist colleges attempting to scale their peer support services. In the last two to three years, more third-party companies have entered the market to address the needs of college learning centers, such as providing an online platform through which to deliver peer tutoring, she said.

Association partners that specialize in tutoring services include Innovative Educators, which offers CRLA-certified peer tutor training and Tutor Matching Service, a company with tutor training courses and online scheduling and a platform to connect students with tutors.

A brand-new online peer tutoring service, Knoyo, recently launched this year and offers to connect high school and college students to a national network of honors college students who are tutors.

"There's new players in the field every day," Schotka said.

Qureshi, of Knack, said the company has grown tenfold since the pandemic began, and its contracts with various colleges increased by 900 percent from 2019 to 2020. He declined to provide specific revenue information.

Another online student engagement company, Upswing, which originally launched in 2014, has seen a 400 percent increase in demand since the pandemic shut

down campuses last year, said Melvin Hines Jr., CEO of the Austin, Tex.-based company. Upswing provides an online platform through which colleges can operate their peer tutoring services, as well as other tools that can help keep students academically engaged, such as a chat bot powered by artificial intelligence that sends reminders and nudges to students about upcoming classes and assignments, Hines said.

"We were slammed pretty much from beginning to end," Hines said of 2020. "Demand for online tutoring doubled immediately. We've done twice as many coaching sessions just with our tutors than in 2019 and had a twofold increase in sessions with peer tutors."

Upswing's revenue grew from $1.2 million in 2019 to $2 million in 2020, or by 67 percent, Hines said. In 2019, 66,000 peer tutoring sessions were completed through Upswing over all, and in 2020, that grew to 100,000 sessions. Typically, 80 percent of students who use the platform once return for another session, he said.

Upswing currently partners with 70 institutions and advertises specifically to community colleges, historically Black colleges and universities, and other institutions that want to provide more targeted academic support for nontraditional and online students, Hines said. The United Negro College Fund announced last month that it is partnering with Upswing to provide the company's academic support services to more than 500 UNCF scholarship recipients, who are Black and studying science, technology, engineering and math fields.

> "It's been incredibly heartwarming to hear about programs where peer tutors stepped up. It was an incredibly selfless act in the moment, and it really made the difference for many programs."

During a recent Upswing webinar, Joyce Langenegger, executive director of academic success for the Blinn College District, a two-year institution with multiple campuses between Houston and Austin, said Blinn was encouraged to invest in the company's services when the pandemic prompted a significant increase in students who took classes entirely online.

"Suddenly, with COVID, everyone became a distance learning student," Langenegger said. "Students suddenly placed in five courses that started out face-to-face and suddenly were all online were desperately struggling to figure out how to survive in that online environment."

The End-All, Be-All Peer Tutoring Solution?

Most colleges with CRLA-certified tutoring programs have their own homegrown system for tutor training, scheduling and service delivery, Schotka said. Mladic said most of these institutions are not looking to replace their traditional peer tutoring setups with products from outside contractors, but they may be interested in supplementing them in hopes of making existing resources more effective and reaching more students.

"Really, the external resource can only be impactful if it complements the existing internal resources and fits within the larger strategic vision of that institution's online academic support," Mladic said.

Schotka said many learning centers have also stuck with basic videoconferencing platforms – such as Zoom and WebEx – to make peer academic support available virtually during the pandemic, rather than relying on a for-profit company to manage tutoring services. The ways in which institutions shifted to remote services "really runs the gamut," Schotka said.

Across most of the campuses that

As Students Dispersed, Tutoring Services Adapted (cont.)

Knack contracts with, engagement with the tutoring platform has been up as more students are seeking out virtual peer help from locations far away from campus, Qureshi said. Other campuses, however, saw a drop-off in clients during the fall semester, potentially due to students getting used to the online-only version of the platform or institutions moving to pass-fail grading policies, which Qureshi said de-incentivize students from getting better grades.

While the third-party services may provide cost savings for institutions themselves, students' disengagement from the services could result in lost income for tutors. In a brick-and-mortar center, tutors typically get paid to staff the center, whether they have appointments during their shifts or not. But on Knack, for example, whether a tutor gets work completely depends on their peers' demand for the service. Qureshi noted that at the University of Florida, nearly three-fourths of students who tutor through Knack rely on it as their primary source of income.

Del'Angel, the student tutor at Florida A&M, said he doesn't need his $12-an-hour tutoring income to pay for his basic needs – it's more of a "side hustle." But he has seen a dip in clients since the pandemic was declared last spring. Even students whom he had seen on a weekly basis stopped requesting sessions on Knack, and students he saw over Zoom during the pandemic were in need of drastic and immediate help for an exam or homework due the next day. He believes students preferred meeting with him in person and aren't as interested in a virtual session.

Kuh, who's also a senior adviser for Knack, which is a paid staff position, said in-person tutoring is more effective for students, but it's not realistic to expect today's college students – who are more likely to be working adults with families – to come to campus during the hours that a traditional learning center is open. Companies that help deliver virtual tutoring to those students are here to stay beyond the pandemic, he said.

"One lesson we learned over this past year is if you can't be in the same room with one another, what else we can do to approximate that experience," Kuh said.

He said that among the various strategies to keep students engaged with their college, peer tutoring "is probably the least used and most promising lever we can pull, if we do it systematically and with greater intentionality." ■

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COVID-Era College: Are Students Satisfied?

Students reflect on what has worked, what has not and what they want from their colleges post-COVID. (Hint: Keep that lecture recording button handy and virtual support options available.)

By Melissa Ezarik // March 24, 2021

Trying to get a pulse on students' satisfaction this academic year to better support them has been like dreaming an impossible dream. As college and university leaders have reopened campuses, following meticulous plans with 100-page summaries, student feedback has been positive, negative and everything in between.

While perusing social media posts, Bloomsburg University of Pennsylvania's provost concluded this: "We were doing everything right and nothing right simultaneously," says Diana Rogers-Adkinson.

Findings of a new Student Voice survey, conducted by *Inside Higher Ed* and College Pulse and presented by Kaplan, indicate that students, as a group, are deeply ambivalent about their college experiences right now. For example:

- 43 percent of those back to campus in some capacity are at least somewhat satisfied with the extent to which they can see friends and meet peers; 38 percent are at least somewhat dissatisfied. Satisfaction is greater at private nonprofit colleges (50 percent) than at public institutions (39 percent).
- 40 percent of students back on campus are at least somewhat satisfied about their ability to connect with faculty and staff; 34 percent feel dissatisfied. Older students are more likely to report extreme satisfaction – 43 percent of those age 24 and up, compared to 12 percent of all students.
- 35 percent of those now on campus are somewhat or extremely satisfied with how accessible in-person student services are, while 29 percent are dissatisfied. Responses from public and private institutions are about even.

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Students were even torn on whether they anticipated common COVID mitigation strategies. Among respondents who have returned to campus, 57 percent did not initially expect to have fewer in-person classes than pre-COVID, 45 percent didn't expect regular COVID testing and 41 percent didn't expect physically distanced spaces.

Envisioning life after COVID, nearly one-third "never want to take another class via Zoom"; half responded that while some things about remote learning worked for them, they are "anxious to get back to all or more in-person classes."

And (pay attention, enrollment management professionals at tuition-dependent residential institutions), 9 percent of the 2,000 undergraduates from 120 colleges surveyed don't ever want to return to in-person classes.

The survey, fielded March 2 through March 9 and representing mainly traditional-age students, is the sec-

ond one conducted for the Student Voice project, which provides higher ed administrators and instructors with insights on student perspectives.

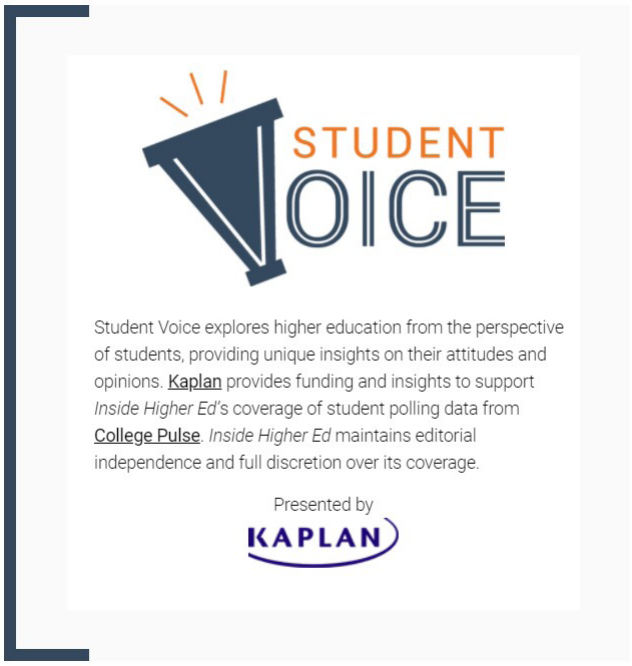
As senior vice president and provost of Bloomsburg, a public institution that reopened campus in the fall, Rogers-Adkinson sympathizes with students, many of whom are first generation and have been home. "They may be struggling to help others around them understand their priorities and the demands of class," she says. "Some students are also helping siblings with schoolwork."

Bloomsburg is currently offering one-quarter of classes in person, as administrators and faculty continually try to strengthen online learning. "Our students are anxious to be back face-to-face, and they made it very clear at the end of the fall semester that they preferred synchronous learning," Rogers-Adkinson says. "We built out what I would call a flat interactive classroom but plan on retrofitting classrooms to allow for more audience participation."

Take a closer look at student living and learning experiences during COVID and their hopes for post-pandemic college life.

Welcome Back (Sort Of)

It's clear to anyone paying attention: the majority of college students look forward to more carefree days. Over all, those who have returned "are happy to be on campus, no matter how you slice or dice that," says Mary DeNiro, CEO and executive director of ACUHO-I, the Association of College and University Housing Officers - International.



Simran Kaur Malhotra, a University of Georgia sophomore who splits her time between an off-campus apartment and her parents' home 90 minutes away, says she misses "hanging out with friends whenever I wanted to. We wouldn't have to make plans or anything. It was a very chill life." While some classes are available in person, as a premed pathway student with a grandmother in the household, Malhotra has chosen remote learning to stay safe. "I haven't met anyone new," she adds.

Lafayette Bussey, who took the fall semester off from Brown University and recently returned to begin his sophomore year, is in the same boat in terms of meeting people outside his circle. He misses "fighting people" (through a mixed martial arts club, that is), singing with his a cappella group (in person) and playing Ultimate Frisbee ("unwilling podmates," he explains).

"Friends and social life" was selected most often in a question asking respondents to choose the top three (out of nine) aspects of campus life that are most missed, with nearly three-quarters selecting it. One respondent at a college in Washington State notes feeling extremely lonely: "I've been on campus two months and the only people I've talked to for more than a minute are staff at doctor's appointments."

While in-person lectures are second-most missed, No. 3 is also nonacademic – participating in clubs and organizations. Malhotra founded a Doctors Without Borders student chapter during COVID. Nearly all activity has been virtual, but about 500 members have raised more than $10,000 to support the international organization.

Two-year students (who represent

250 of the survey respondents) had the same top two but a different third-most-missed item: libraries and study spaces.

Donald Guy Generals, Community College of Philadelphia's president, says his students' social lives have traditionally involved a lot of community activities, such as helping local schools with community gardens. Students who continued their education through the pandemic (about 10 percent of the college's enrollment did not) also need a place to have conversations they might not be able to have at home, conversations that help develop racial and cultural identities. "Schools are safe zones for many of our students coming from disadvantaged backgrounds," says Generals, whose institution has been unable to open yet for in-person classes. "We offer a platform for students to express themselves and engage with others."

Students on reopened campuses (half of the survey sample) likely had five to 10 months to get used to pandemic life. Yet, a question about what virus mitigation measures they had expected to see when they returned revealed a surprising trend: one in five anticipated college to be about the same as pre-pandemic, and many others didn't imagine specific basic safety precautions in place.

More than half of returning students had not expected fewer in-person classes and events, or changes to dining such as fewer communal dining spaces and more take-home meals, compared to pre-pandemic. Between three in 10 and four in 10 students didn't anticipate hand-sanitizing stations, indoor mask wearing for students and professors, physically distanced spaces or regular COVID testing. Students whose campuses have not yet opened up are just slightly more likely to anticipate a return involving such measures.

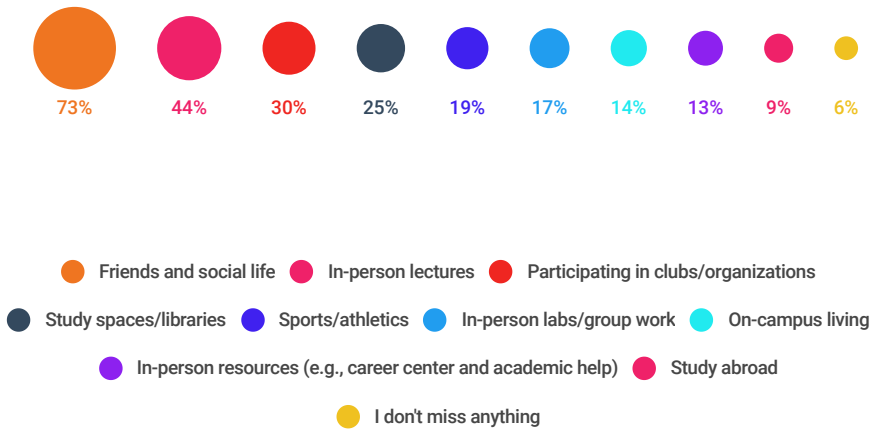
"Eighteen- to 22-year-olds at times don't believe the world responds the same way to them," DeNiro says. "They take more risks, and the way they process information is different."

What about all that pre-return communication clearly outlining policies? "As those in marketing say, you have to send a message seven times in seven different ways for people to understand," she quips.

Eric Wood, director of Texas Christian University's Counseling & Mental Health Center, has a similar theory. "Many students knew something would change but didn't think about what the changes would be or how it might affect them personally," he says. According to the health belief model in social psychological professions, those who don't feel susceptible to health risk are less likely to change behavior or take precautions. Students may have assumed schools would make changes impacting "other people," like faculty and staff, Wood explains.

Political leanings could also have

What Aspects of Campus Life Students Are Missing Most



Source: Inside Higher Ed / College Pulse survey of 2,000 college students

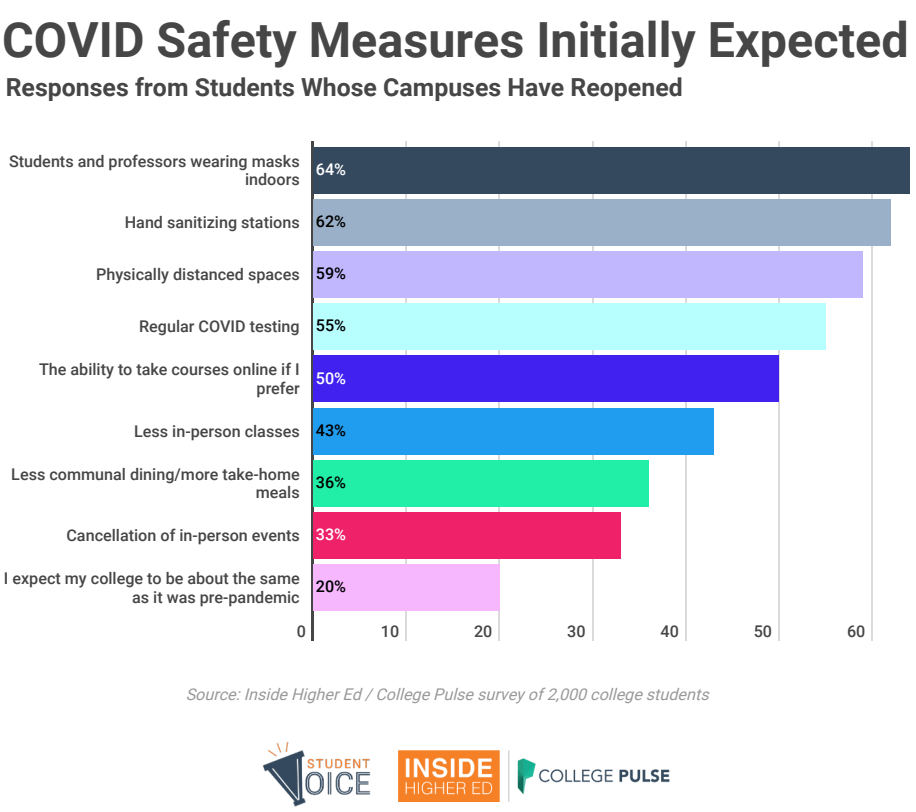
influenced responses, even though students weren't asked what precautions they "wanted." Democrats were generally more likely than Republicans to anticipate changes. Regional differences in responses were minimal, although international students were more likely to expect mitigation measures.

Expectations aside, students generally fell into line. Two-thirds of those who have returned to campus are at least somewhat satisfied with overall procedures in place for safety during COVID; only 16 percent are dissatisfied.

Bussey, who serves on Student Voice's Student Advisory Board, says he's "completely satisfied" with Brown's "extremely rigorous" safety procedures. "The main complaint I'll hear is about punitive measures for those who break the rules."

Bino Campanini, senior vice president for student life and alumni affairs at Florida Institute of Technology, says that as an engineering and science institution (with engineering types tending to like protocol), "we didn't have a lot of pushback." One indication of buy-in: students often wear masks even when optional, such as while walking around outside.

As the health data reporter for *The Red & Black*, the independent newspaper covering the University of Georgia, Malhotra says officials "did the best they could, but it could have been better." One concern involves the decision to reopen in a community with open bars right across the street. "I would see long lines of students going in, many of them not wearing masks correctly, and my heart would break," she says. "What if the next day they went to an in-person class?"



As for tending to students' mental health, rather than giving students a spring break, UGA leaders scheduled scattered days off. Malhotra's professors planned exams right afterward, so those days haven't served as breaks.

One Arizona university respondent says nothing worked well: "It was more just learning to adapt and live in constant frustration with the university's and fellow students' mediocre response."

Higher ed should give more credit to students as a group, though, says DeNiro. "They may push the lines, but they get it. They're smart kids, and they want to do what's right."

Services Satisfaction, Class Contentment

Students who have returned to their physical campuses, as noted above, are pretty evenly split on whether they are satisfied or dissatisfied by their access to in-person services.

Sometimes frustrations involve being unable to reach staff. When Smith College's Student Financial Services office initially shuttered in-person operations, for example, office extensions couldn't be forwarded to homes. Callers would hear a recording to please email so a Zoom meeting could be scheduled. "Because there was so much activity in terms of the change in [residential] status, staff were behind," says Vice President for Enrollment Audrey Smith, who oversees the department. "Someone would

email and not get an immediate response. Our customer service was not up to our expectations of ourselves, nor our families' expectations of us."

Now work volume has settled down and a new phone system enables a live greeting, even though employees remain remote.

Campus dining departments have had to overhaul operations, maximizing takeout and streamlining meal options. "They are certainly slower and there's less choice and flexibility," says DeNiro, adding that even "in normal times, students could be pretty critical" of dining.

At Brown, Bussey says students need to reserve a slot for a meal pickup – and those slots will fill five hours in advance. "This has probably been the most frustrating thing for most students."

On the academic side, 80 percent of students struggle with motivation to complete coursework or attend classes.

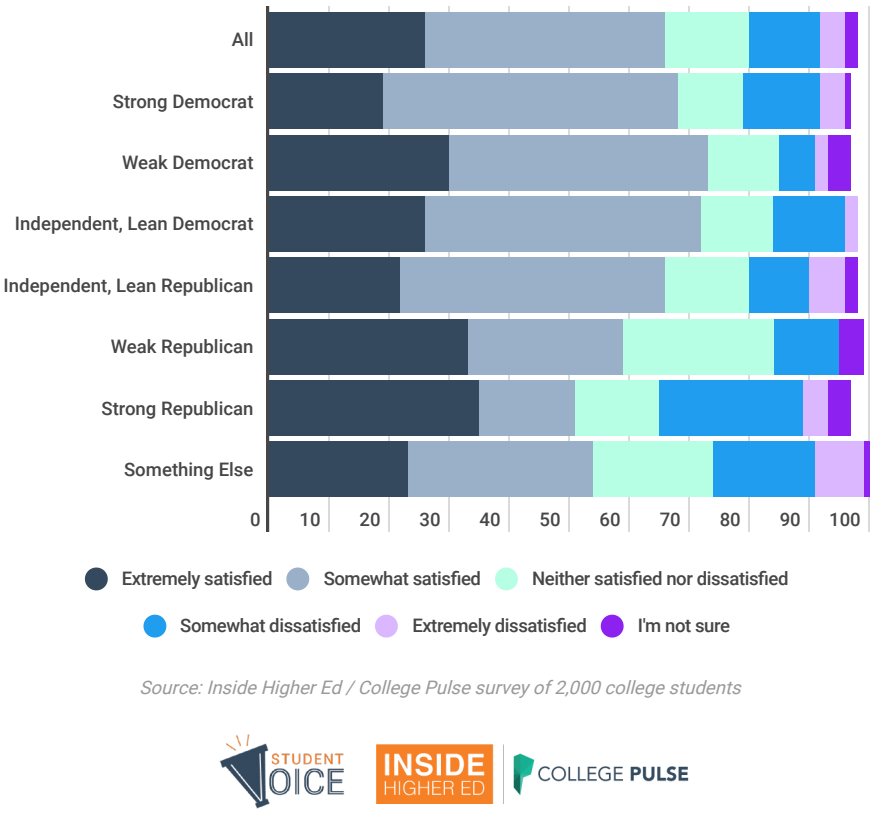
Malhotra, who took two organic chemistry classes online, says, "It's kind of hard because you can see your bed. They don't mandate video and don't know if you're listening."

Her parents, who are from India, are "very education- and hard work-driven," she says. That upbringing helps in reminding herself she's there to learn.

One Texas survey respondent noted that in-person learning is more motivating and less distracting: "Even if we can't really talk to each other and are distant, it feels good to be in the presence of other students.

Satisfaction with COVID Safety Procedures on Campus

Responses by Political Leaning



Source: Inside Higher Ed / College Pulse survey of 2,000 college students

Rogers-Adkinson of Bloomsburg, which has an experience-based curriculum, says she can see how missing that piece would impact motivation.

Since her office is based in the library, she often sees students arriving for a day of classes in individual study rooms with an "arsenal" of snacks and drinks. "I'll bring chocolate in for them," she says.

Just 40 percent of students whose campuses are active are at least somewhat satisfied with faculty and staff connections. That number is 67 percent for two-year students.

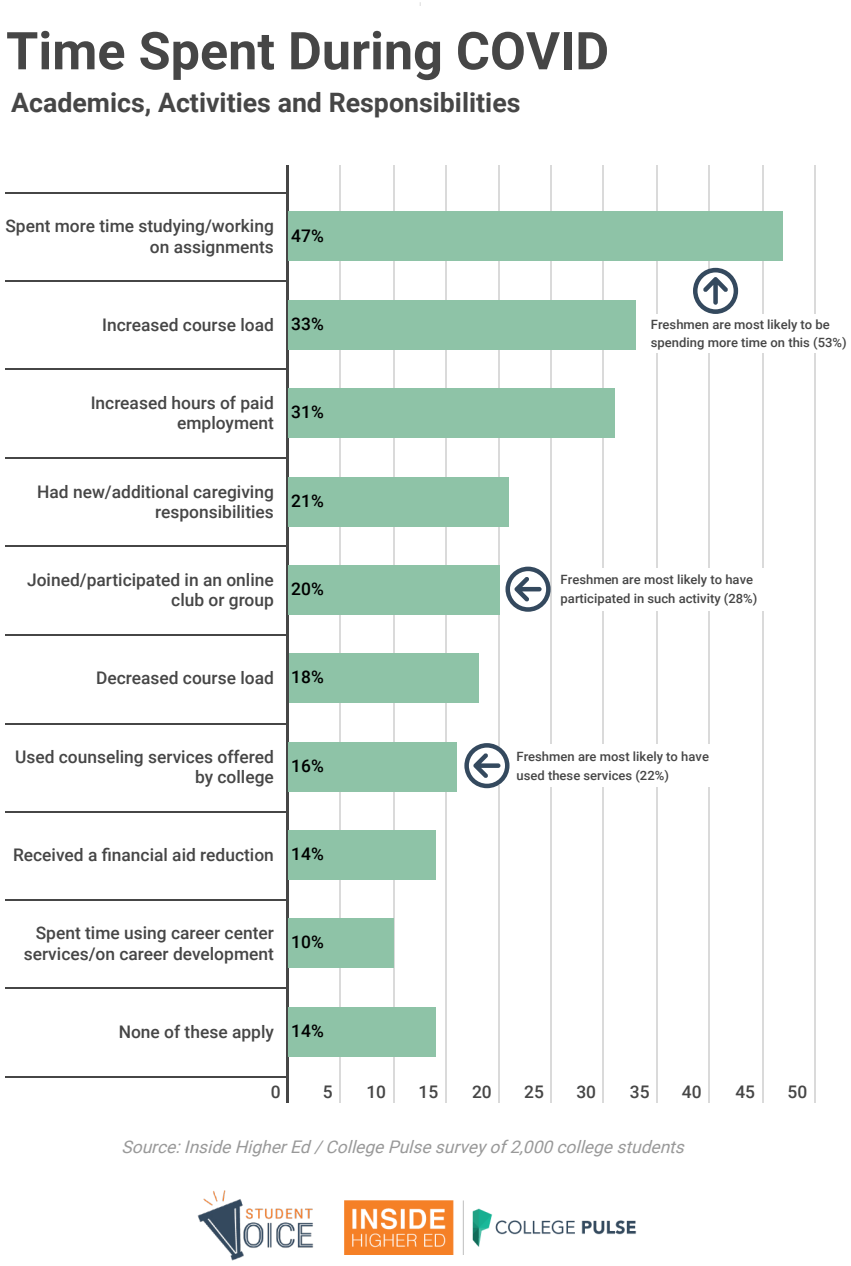
"I think two-year faculty are more inclined to be responsive because of the nature of the community college student being less traditional," says Generals. "Faculty are more willing to go beyond their office hours. They understand the needs of our students."

Community college students are less likely to report online learning challenges; 10 percent say they haven't experienced any at all, compared to 2 percent of four-year students. Perhaps two-year students are "less prone to complain about things, more willing to dig in and get the work done," says Generals.

"Our students are incredibly resilient. This is not the only trauma in their lives." Plus, he adds, online classes may be more familiar to two-year students.

Over all, during COVID:

- Nearly half of students surveyed report spending more time studying or working on assignments.
- One-third have increased their course loads, with women (36 percent) more likely to do this than men (28 percent). Eighteen percent decreased their course loads.
- About one-third have taken on more paid employment hours.
- One in five students have had more caregiving responsibilities this year. Malhotra, for instance, is helping both her younger sister with asynchronous online AP classes and her parents with getting her grandmother to doctor's appointments and elsewhere.
- Twenty percent joined or participated in an online club or group, with freshmen most likely to have done so (28 percent).
- Only 10 percent of respondents report having spent time using career center services or focused on career development.



Source: Inside Higher Ed / College Pulse survey of 2,000 college students

Visions of a COVID Aftermath

Data dicing on desires for future learning may provide insight into who wants what.

The one-third who never want another class via Zoom again are most likely to be male (42 percent versus 23 percent of women), at a four-year institution (33 percent versus 22 percent of two-year students) and politically conservative (over half of Independents who lean Republican and 42 percent of strong Republicans selected this response).

Among the half planning a return to fully or mostly in-person, two-thirds are currently in courses with a mix of synchronous and asynchronous sessions. Women (56 percent) are more likely than men (41 percent) to want a mix of classroom and home learning.

"I'm anticipating the return of in-person classes, but I don't hate this so much," says Bussey. "It's really, really convenient to just log on. I don't know that it's the most conducive to my retaining information, but it has its advantages."

The 9 percent who say they nev-

er want to return to in-person – a group that could disrupt higher ed financial models – are more likely to be female (11 percent) than male (6 percent).

That matches up with a conversation Rogers-Adkinson recently had with a science professor, who notices women contributing more on Zoom than they had face-to-face.

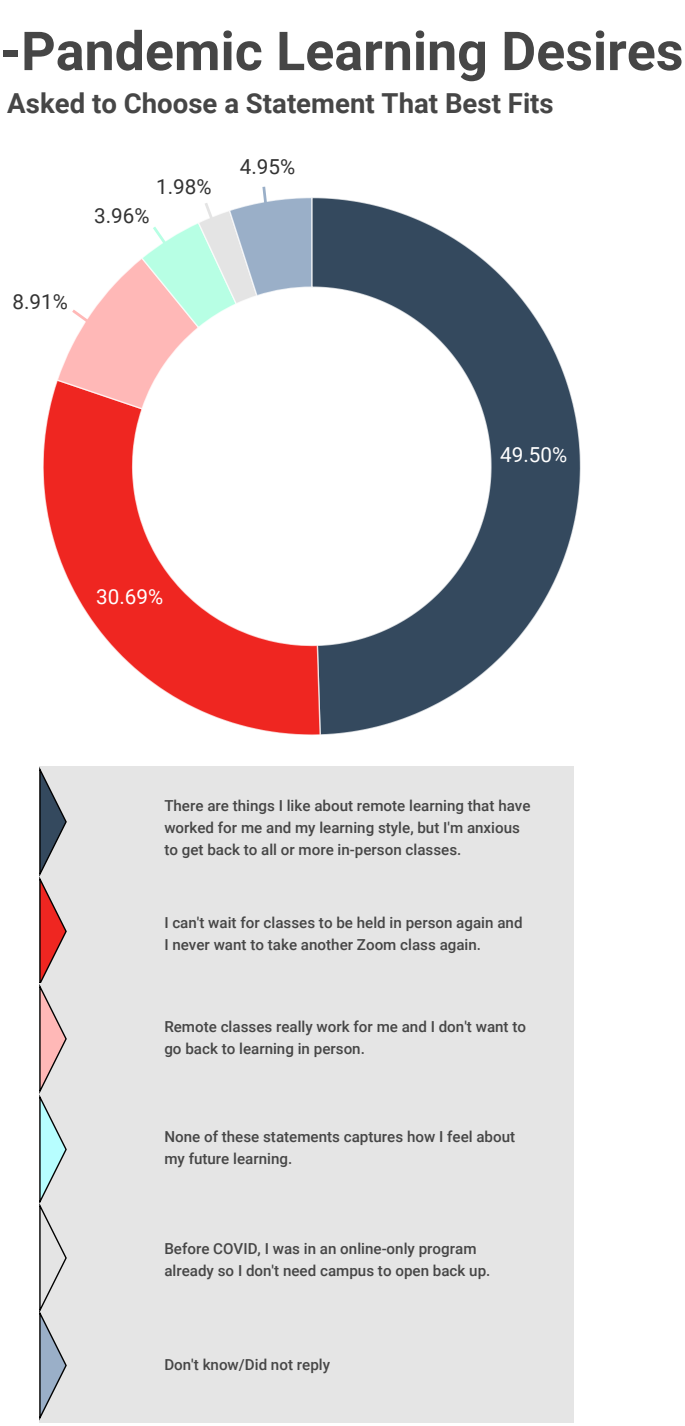
For a college like Smith, which has had a record number of applications this year, dealing with a suspected drop-off of students desiring online-only programs could be as simple as admitting a larger entering class, says Smith.

Tom Green, who oversees professional development for the enrollment management community of the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO), hesitates to predict that this data point indicates imminent crisis.

"Students do tend to answer with what's right in front of them at the moment," notes Green, an associate executive director at the organization.

But assuming some students do remain online only after the pandemic, residential institutions expecting all their students to come in person could take a hit to the bottom line, he says. "Thinking about some of the smaller institutions, it is a big deal for them."

Some schools Green has worked with have students with tremendous logistical hurdles getting to campuses. He can see them considering how great it would be to avoid, say, commuting an hour via



Source: Inside Higher Ed / College Pulse survey of 2,000 college students

three buses.

Unfortunately, "predictive models of the past aren't going to help us that much now," he adds. "We're all watching to see what happens this fall."

For now, "really strong, highly branded institutions are doing extremely well with their application numbers," he says.

Fulfilling continuing students' biggest post-COVID wishes could be challenging.

The top one, for 79 percent, is keeping lectures available online. Schools such as Community College of Philadelphia have used COVID relief funds to enable recording in classrooms, says Generals.

Colleges need to convince faculty to not fear this. "I always hear faculty worry that if they record, students won't come to class," says Rogers-Adkinson, formerly a faculty member at a high-disability campus, where students' ability to review lectures later was crucial to success.

Students' second hope – nearly half selected this item – is the option to toggle between in-person and online attendance.

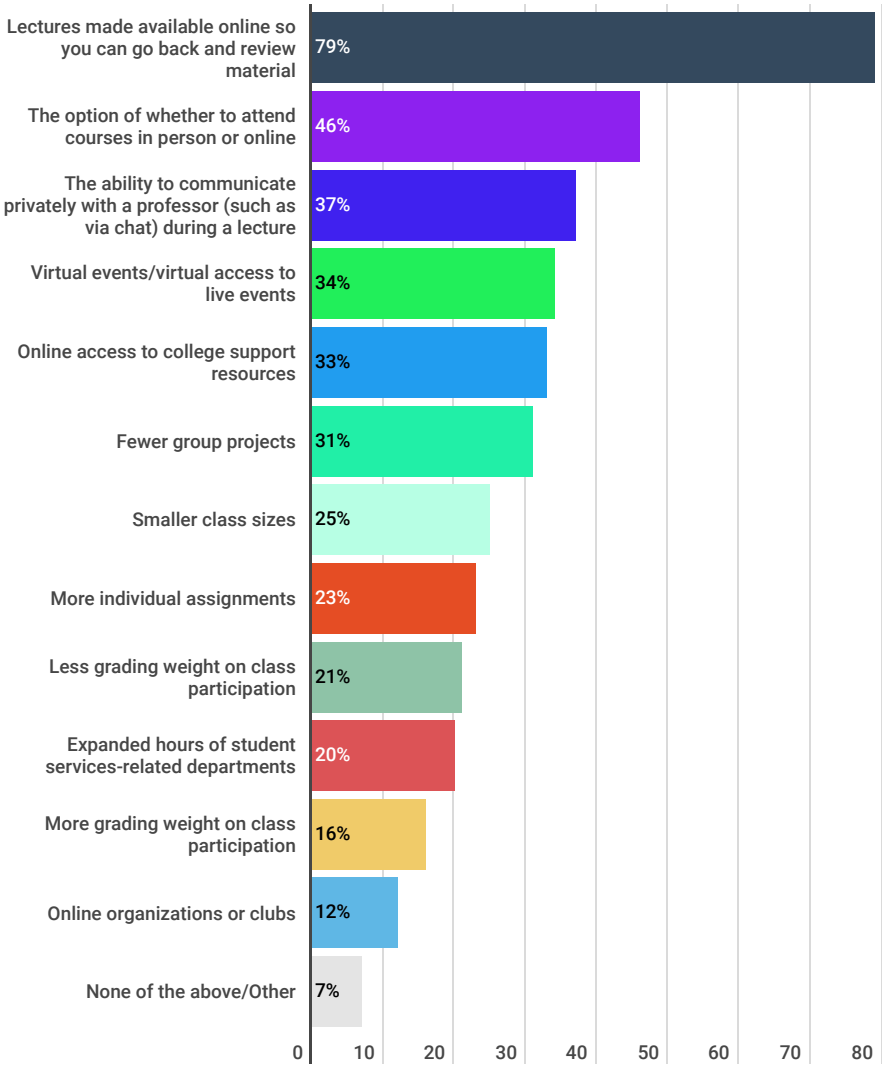
"We should not put everything back in the building just because it used to be," said one survey respondent in Arizona.

Generals agrees. "We've shown the classroom doesn't need to be within the confines of four walls. And we can be a 24-7 operation."

Rogers-Adkinson has noticed that some faculty – such as those in Bloomsburg's Zeigler College of Business – seem most willing to move toward learning modality choice.

Thirty-seven percent of students would like to continue communicating privately with professors during class. "Some apps allow that kind of opportunity," says Rogers-Adkinson. But it raises questions of lecture flow and integration of chat monitoring. Maybe a TA keeps track

Pandemic-Era Experiences Students Want Post-COVID



Source: Inside Higher Ed / College Pulse survey of 2,000 college students

of the chat or it gets archived so the professor can reply later.

Respondents expressed a desire to ease back into college life. "Please don't expect us to magically go back to normal pre-pandemic students right away," one California student implored.

Rogers-Adkinson has been thinking about preparations for current freshmen who never had the campus experience returning as sophomores with a lot to learn about navigating life on campus. Also, what will students who spent a good chunk of time in K-12 being taught differently be looking for in a college?

One-third of students surveyed want continued access to virtual resources such as tutoring, advising or counseling. Wood anticipates most TCU students preferring in-person counseling but plans to continue remote sessions – and evening hours.

Looking back at this time, he suspects all students will realize how much they learned not to take things – like the ability to attend a football game – for granted.

DeNiro adds, "They are going to be able to reflect on this time and recognize that even a pandemic couldn't stop them from reaching their goals." ■

Read Original Article ▸▸ https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2021/03/24/student-experiences-during-covid-and-campus-reopening-concerns

A Virtual Culture of Care

The Caring Campus Initiative launched as a national effort to coach community college faculty and staff members on how to better connect with students. The pandemic forced participating campuses to foster a sense of belonging for students online.

By Sara Weissman // June 11, 2021

Leaders at Victor Valley College, a community college east of Los Angeles, are planning a series of changes: a program where students earn points for attending campus events, a new system that sends monthly data analytics to the college president on the number of calls and emails from students that resulted in them getting the information they needed, and staff adopting the "10-foot rule" to actively approach any student standing within 10 feet who may be in need of assistance.

The moves are a part of Victor Valley's effort to cultivate a culture of care on campus, both online and in person, as a participating college in the national Caring Campus Initiative.

The initiative, which involves 66 colleges, was first launched in spring 2018 by the Institute for Evidence-Based Change, a nonprofit that works with education stakeholders to improve student outcomes. The goal of the program is to increase positive interactions between faculty and staff and students so that students feel more connected to their campuses and are more likely to stay and graduate.

"We really are living, eating, breathing this thing," said Victor Valley College president Daniel Walden.

During the yearlong program, coaches from the organization help a group of staff or faculty members at a cohort of community colleges identify and introduce a set of small changes in behavior designed to make students feel more welcome. These "behavioral commitments" can range from staff wearing name tags so students can easily identify them to staff members meeting regularly across departments so they can better refer students to the resources they need in other offices.

ABNER "ACE" CAGUIOA

Staff members at Irvine Valley College greet students at a drive-through campus event.

Brad Phillips, president and CEO at the Institute for Evidence-Based Change, and Jordan Horowitz, its chief operating officer, are both former mental health professionals and argue that human connection between faculty, staff and students is the ultimate retention tool.

"What we're moving to is a relationship-based education experience," Phillips said.

His hope is to serve close to 100 institutions by this fall as the initiative expands with recent funding from philanthropic foundations focused on higher education, including Ascendium Education Group, the ECMC Foundation and the chancellor's office of the California Community College system, which supported the program's first cohort.

The institute has had to pivot this year to tackle the challenge of help-

ing community colleges create a culture of care online as campuses closed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The initiative shifted to virtual meetings in spring 2020, and coaches are now working to guide staff and faculty on how to implement the same behavioral goals, tweaked for virtual offices and classrooms.

For example, one of the behaviors coaches suggest for staff members is a "warm referral." Instead of just telling a student to go to a different office for guidance, staff are encouraged to call ahead to other staff members, walk the student from one office to another and follow up to confirm that the student got the help needed. During the pandemic, coaches advised getting a student's call-back information when they reach out for help and following up with another phone call to ensure the student was assisted.

"Colleges were scrambling to move everything online: courses, student services, operations, everything," Phillips said. "What was really helpful was that the behaviors were really simple to implement. We weren't asking them to do these herculean efforts during this terrible time. The behaviors really don't change. They're just adjusted for a non-face-to-face environment."

Some faculty and staff members said the changes they'd already instituted as a part of the program made serving students during the pandemic easier.

As a part of the initiative, faculty members at Oakton Community College in Illinois, for example, developed the Persistence Project, specific courses where faculty members are required to meet one on one with each student at the start of the term. Instructors also must learn students' names within the first two weeks of classes and give students an assignment early on in the course that provides an indication of which students need extra help.

> "We're dealing with real students, real people, who have real aspirations, real challenges to achieve what their goals are, and that we can be the connection that they need to achieve their goals."

Oakton faculty members said these small changes made a significant difference for students of color. The persistence rate for Black students who participated in these courses was 13 percentage points higher than for Black students over all, according to data collected in fall 2019.

When classes moved online, students felt "lost and frustrated," and those pre-established one-on-one meetings were critical for faculty members to check in with students about what they were going through, said Lisa Cherivtch, a business professor at the college.

"It reminds the people that are doing it that we're not dealing with robots," Cherivtch said. "We're dealing with real students, real people, who have real aspirations, real challenges to achieve what their goals are, and that we can be the connection that they need to achieve their goals. It changes not only the students but the instructors that participate."

Akia Marshall, who served as an outreach specialist at Riverside City College in Southern California until April, said Caring Campus Initiative coaching sessions, which ended in 2018, forced staff members across the campus to meet and spend time with each other. Before the program was institut-

ed there, co-workers who referred students to each other's offices for years barely knew each other and sometimes lacked a full understanding of each other's roles, she said. When staff members started working remotely because of the pandemic, the relationships they had formed through the Caring Campus program helped get supports to students in a more streamlined way, she said.

"We were just so much more unified," Marshall said. "It wasn't, 'I'm talking to this department' or 'I'm talking to this office.' I'm talking to Steve. I'm talking to Natalie. I know they're going to help me out. We've talked about our kids. We've shown pictures of cats. I know that I can count on them for anything."

Marshall is now director of enrollment at Mt. San Jacinto College, also in Southern California, but she's still in touch with former colleagues at Riverside she met through the initiative.

San Antonio College, the winner of this year's Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence, joined the Caring Campus Initiative in fall 2020 in the thick of the pandemic. The program helped the college commit to some simple tasks that would make students' virtual experience easier: assigning point people to update directories so students could reach the staff members they needed, putting someone in charge of monitoring the college's inundated voice mail and responding to every student email so students knew their messages were seen and would be addressed within a specified time frame.

"For San Antonio College, we all have what I call an educator heart," said Robert Vela, president of the college. "There's no doubt. But oftentimes we're so overloaded with the volume of need that we get into a transactional mode when we're dealing with and working with our students … Every interaction needs to be intentional about building that relationship. These behavioral commitments that we agreed to, it's all to ensure that the verbals, the nonverbals, everything that we're doing is communicating, 'Come be a part of our community.'"

Small behavioral changes can deeply shift the way staff members see their roles, said Amy Hunter, senior administrative assistant for the Irvine Valley College business school and president of the Irvine Valley College Classified Senate, which represents employees at the Southern California campus. The college's staff members wear special T-shirts that read, "A Caring Campus" whenever they get on a Zoom call with students or run socially distanced drive-through events on campus.

She said wearing shirts with slogans and name tags might seem like small gestures, but they clearly mark staff members as people students can ask for help, and they send a message to staff that they're a critical part of the "guided pathways process" as students' "first line of contact" with the college.

Horowitz, of the Institute for Evidence-Based Change, said the initiative won't go back to purely guiding staff and faculty members on face-to-face interactions with students. He believes the need for a personal touch in virtual exchanges with students is here to stay. He noted that community colleges had online programs even before the pandemic, and staff often dealt with students over the phone.

These virtual interactions have always been valuable building blocks in creating a culture of care, but higher education leaders are just more "clued in" now, he said. "We'll continue to support that." ■

Read Original Article ▸▸ https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2021/06/11/community-colleges-seek-create-caring-online-services

VIEWS

Using Innovative Technologies to Improve Transfer Student Success

Arizona State University's use of innovative technology in response to the changing needs of today's students, 40 percent of whom begin at community colleges, is successfully building capacity to better serve transfers.

By Maria Hesse and Cheryl Hyman // April 8, 2021

Tens of millions of workers will require new skills and new training in the coming years. These would-be learners – at both community colleges and universities – will require a dramatic simplification of intake processes, credit evaluation systems and academic pathways. And if we can support them in enrolling, they'll join the millions of college students who are already pursuing their bachelor's degrees in nonlinear ways.

At Arizona State University, we've found that innovative technology – when thoughtfully deployed – can be incredibly helpful in responding to the changing needs of today's students, including the more than 40 percent of ASU undergraduates who begin at community colleges. Over many years, we have gained considerable insight into what works, as we have partnered with more than 1,000 community colleges across the country to build capacity and better serve transfers.

Technology to Serve Current and Prospective Students

ASU offers tools and services to support students at every step of their learning journey, such as choosing a career and academic program, planning and tracking progress toward a degree, transferring achievements seamlessly across institutions, and sharing skills and learning achievements with employers. But when it comes to better serving transfer students, it's not enough for a university to focus only on those who are already enrolled. A university has to be willing to focus resources on tools for prospective students who are studying at community colleges across the country and who may still be years away from transferring.

MyPath2ASU is a program that includes a robust set of tools to provide prospective transfer students clarity on credit transferability and applicability and facilitate rapid verification and approval of courses not yet evaluated. The ASU Transfer Guide offers a searchable database of over 800,000 course equivalencies from other postsecondary institutions, educational experiences completed during military service and standardized exams. Community college students can plan their path to ASU from the time they are registering for their first college classes. The Transfer Guide provides clear course recommendations and term-by-term steps to be guaranteed admission to not only ASU, but to a transfer student's ASU major of choice.

In this way, the MyPath2ASU program makes credit applicability clear and helps transfer students shorten time to bachelor's degree completion and reduce excess credits.

TACKLING TRANSFER
Elevating transfer work while sharing lessons and tools for success.

Technology to Allow Scaling and Personalization

In other arenas, technology can scale to deliver a personalized advising experience to large numbers of students. For years, people have proposed increasing the number of advisers at community colleges and universities, to help students make informed choices about their career goals, select an academic program and support their progress toward a degree. But the reality is that budget constraints do not allow most institutions to add significant numbers of new positions that would bring down advising caseloads to more manageable sizes. Further, no one adviser can or should be expected to know all there is to know about the hundreds of career options and academic programs at every institution.

Innovative tools can help increase advising capacity, handling many of the more time-consuming but important tasks, such as creating personalized academic plans for thousands of students. Within MyPath2ASU, for example, the Pathway Progress feature allows students to perform a pathway audit, seeing which requirements they have completed toward their intended university major and which are currently in progress or remain to be completed. And for students who may change their minds along the way, this feature allows students to ask important what-if questions. For example, what if I want to change my major at ASU from one area to another? How would the community college courses I have already taken transfer, and more importantly, apply, to the proposed new choice?

Answering such questions would normally take up many advising hours, but by harnessing the power of technology to perform these tasks, students can quickly run pathway audits and examine their possibilities with full and accurate information. Thus, we can personalize the student's experience, scale services to meet the needs of many more students and free up advisers to spend their time and expertise on other important conversations with students. Further, because we can automate certain transfer processes, such as course equivalencies and academic plan development, we can ensure that all students are treated in a fair and consistent way.

Technology to Support Student Agency and Autonomy

Technology tools can also give students more control over their academic and career pathways. Many higher education professionals take pride in guiding students through the higher education system, but our goal should be to make the system transparent and easy to navigate. We need to put the right information into the hands of students at the right time so that they have the agency and autonomy to do what is in their best interests.

Community college partners are working with ASU to allow students to control their own academic transcripts through the use of distributed ledger technology. The concept is similar to people controlling their health-care records, as opposed to having to call one doctor's office to get records transferred to another doctor's office. Owning their own learning credentials will allow students to easily access and share their transcripts and diploma, as many times as needed throughout their college years and their career.

Facilitating the easy exchange of transcripts from both the community college and university will also contribute to a more seamless reverse transfer of credit process. ASU's current reverse transfer of credit system provides for hundreds of community college transfers to earn their associate degrees every year, but this electronic exchange of transcripts, where students control who can and cannot view their records, may make it possible for the university to help thousands of students and their community colleges to increase associate degree completion.

The approaches and tools we've outlined are, of course, just some of the ones that could help improve transfer. More important than any one technical solution will be supporting a culture of innovation and learning across the nation's community colleges and universities. This is the broader effort we are advancing at ASU and through our service on the Tackling Transfer Policy Advisory Board. It is the responsibility of all of us who are passionate about education to design responsive and adaptive systems that work for all individuals, not just the few. We will know we are successful, at the end of the day, if we are empowering learners to have greater control over their academic destiny and supporting their ability to complete their educational goals. ■

Read Original Article ▸▸ https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2021/01/26/mental-health-professionals-are-themselves-facing-mental-health-challenges

The Value of Effective Nudging During COVID

Despite increasing debate about its viability, if done correctly and with an appropriate level of intention, it can significantly improve student outcomes, John M. Burdick and Emily Peeler contend.

By John M. Burdick and Emily Peeler // February 23, 2021

Until recently, the concept of nudging – low-cost, low-touch interventions aimed at driving people toward particular behaviors without mandating action or restricting options – was a popular strategy with student support units across higher education. Richard H. Thaler and Cass R. Sunstein popularized this approach, based on behavioral science, in their 2008 book, *Nudge*, and scholars like Ben Castleman at the University of Virginia and Caroline Hoxby at Stanford University shortly thereafter adapted it for use in higher education. Recognizing that social, physical and psychological factors can often discourage students from acting in their own self-interest, those scholars showed that nudging could help students navigate college and the complex bureaucratic processes that often create barriers to academic success.

In the years that followed, admissions, financial aid and registrar departments across the country began using nudging – through digital platforms like emails, learning management systems and especially text messaging – as a means to help students act on things like paying a bill, submitting a FAFSA or meeting a deadline. Even Michelle Obama got on board with the Reach Higher Initiative, which used text message and email-based nudges to increase awareness of the value of a postsecondary education and provided students with access to financial aid resources. People hoped that this simple, affordable and easily scalable use of technology would help colleges address some of the consistent challenges related to student access and achievement. Following the 2008 recession, resource-strapped institutions viewed nudging as a simple and cost-effective way to offer structured and intrusive support to students, especially for those most vulnerable.

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But as more student support teams applied this strategy, and more research was conducted, nudging's potential to influence change in students' behaviors came increasingly into question. In 2019, for instance, Philip Oreopoulos and Uros Petronijevic published a research study that argued that none of the relatively large nudging initiatives that they examined seemed to have significant influence on academic outcomes, especially when it came to driving students toward anything more than straightforward, task-oriented actions. Another study even showed that when scaled nationally, repeated text messages and

emails did not prompt more students to apply to college or complete the FAFSA.

Nudging, once labeled the $6 solution, seems to have been increasingly discounted as the magic bullet that can solve the big issues in higher education. Many administrators who have turned to this tool to help drive access and enrollment goals have been left wondering if nudging is nothing more than a new way to send students reminder messages.

Nudging and the COVID-19 Pandemic

Then came the pandemic.

During the last several months, our students have not only been undergoing the COVID-19 pandemic but also a devastated economy, police violence and the subsequent Black Lives Matter protesting, and the political turmoil of the election and its aftermath. They're experiencing a level of stress that is unprecedented for students in modern American history. Surely this stress is impacting how students are navigating the rigors of college life and learning in ways we're not even fully aware of yet. It's up to faculty and administrators to find creative ways to support and engage with our students during this trying context.

While the debate on the viability of nudging has continued, we in the New York University Office of Student Success believe that text message-based nudging, if done correctly and with an appropriate level of intention, can improve student outcomes. It can also increase levels of curricular and co-curricular engagement and, perhaps most important, increase student perception of support and connectedness during this challenging time. Thus, for the start of the past fall semester, we designed and implemented a large text message-based nudge campaign that had two primary intentions.

> "Is text message-based nudging a magic bullet that can solve all of the issues facing higher education during this challenging period? No. But it can be an effective, scalable and efficient way to engage, support and encourage college students in this unprecedented time."

The first and more prevailing was to send students passive content. The goal was not to drive immediate action, like many of the early nudging campaigns, which focused on task-driven behavior like submitting a FAFSA or registering for courses. Rather, we wanted to positively influence academic behavior over a prolonged period of time by sending students a series of quick tips that encourage behaviors that lead to academic and personal growth. Those tips, which include learning-to-learn content such as goal setting, time management and learning strategies, along with wellness and mindfulness suggestions, weren't designed to elicit an immediate response from students. Rather, their purpose was to subconsciously redirect students' attention at key moments during the academic semester. For example: here is an example of a goal-setting reminder that we sent to students in the first week of the semester: "Hi <Student Name>! New semester, new you, new goals! Remember, make your goals SMART. S - Specific. M - Measurable. A - Actionable. R - Realistic. T - Timely. What is one goal you have for the spring semester?"

The second intent was to give students an open channel of communication that allowed for individualized support opportunities. Students can choose to answer but often are not prompted to do so, and a professional case manager will respond, offering support in real time. That has allowed us to be mindful of the time commitment required of our team, while still providing the support students need.

In partnership with faculty mem-

bers, we've focused our outreach efforts on first-year students and those in a large introductory biology course. We chose this population in part because of the distinct challenges they face as they begin their college experience. We saw the benefits of this particular campaign as multifold, including the ease of scalability, the relatively low cost (we worked with a third-party vendor for the technology component) and the ability to target at-risk student groups through real-time communication and interaction.

What We Found

We are optimistic that this approach is moving us in the right direction. This is a new initiative at a challenging moment, so we continue to experiment, survey students and adapt to continually improve the process. But while further assessment is needed, early results have shown a positive relationship between receiving academic nudges and student academic performance in high-enrollment, high-stumble-rate STEM courses. The opt-out rate for the biology course was a mere 0.5 percent.

Moreover, a fall survey of nudge recipients showed that 94 percent of students said the texts made them feel like someone at NYU cared about their success, 95 percent said they felt comfortable reaching out for help, 96 percent said the texts made them feel more informed about university resources and 95 percent found text messaging to be an effective form of communication during remote learning. And in a large universitywide survey, first-year students also reported feeling more connected to the university community at large – a result that our nudge campaign surely influenced. Student responses to our messages have been highly positive, with many students expressing gratitude for the content and to be hearing from a real person. Common responses are expressions of thanks, appreciation and "I needed this."

A particularly poignant example was a message of affirmation we sent to students on the same day many of them learned they'd need to quarantine in their dorms. Students were feeling unprepared, anxious and scared. In interacting with our text message, many realized for the first time that a real person was on the other side – someone who cared about their success and was available to chat, joke and let them vent their frustrations.

Above all else, what we are seeing is a change in students' perceptions. By sending encouraging messages that reinforce positive academic habits and affirm belonging, we are finding that students perceive greater support from the university. As student support practitioners, is that not what we are here for?

How to Implement an Effective Nudge Campaign

This moment is calling on us to change our behaviors, become more agile and find creative solutions to best support our students to adapt holistically – rather than continually asking them to change, despite the precarity they are facing. Here are some tips for designing and implementing a nudge campaign to engage and support your students during COVID-19 at your own university.

Reframe what you define as nudges and how to use them. Researchers at Duke University's Teaching and Learning Innovation Lab have argued that the concept of nudging has become a sort of a catch-all term to "refer to virtually any intervention designed to create incremental behavior change." Under this framing, email or text message reminders are often conceptualized as nudges, when in reality they are nothing more than traditional reminders. Nudges should be more ubiquitous and passive in nature – they are nudges, not shoves or nags – and they should not always require immediate action or response. This is why with text-based nudges, response rate is not a valid measure of the nudges' effectiveness.

We recommend that you design your nudges based on behavioral psychology theory to gently encourage subtle changes in student behavior. The U.K. Cabinet Office's Institute of Government in conducting in their MINDSPACE Approach provides a great framework.

Send nudges from a human, not a bot. Allow for two-way communication between your team and students. One of the key things that we learned as we developed our program was that students are far more likely to engage with nudges if they clearly come from a person. Students, like the rest of us, are receiving automated emails, texts and other forms of digital communication all the time. It is easy to ignore this communication when you believe it is autogenerated. While you will be sending these nudges to

large groups of people at once, use a staff member's name in the message and send a photo or other indication that a human being is directly communicating with students.

Also, research in behavioral science has shown that by the feelings we have toward a messenger and their perceived authority influences the weight we give to the information they share with us. If you build a positive rapport with students through consistent, friendly and useful messaging, they will be more likely to pay attention to nudges. We have also found that while sending a message from an authority figure like a university employee gives it a certain gravitas, students also value hearing from peers. Thus, peer-to-peer messaging may also be a useful strategy for a nudge campaign.

Be intentional and specific. Many of the earlier nudge campaigns worked because they were fairly intentional about whom they were nudging and when, as well as what behaviors they hoped to change. Thus, it's best to fragment the population you want to reach into subsets according to school, academic program and enrollment year so that the content is as relevant as possible. At NYU, we chose to nudge first-year students because we felt we could have the greatest impact on this group of students; their awareness of university resources was fairly limited and their academic behaviors were less engrained compared to upper-class students.

Regarding content and scheduling, your academic calendar should guide all messages. But leave room for the unexpected by building in some flexibility to adjust to changes.

Pay attention to language and tone. The language should be persuasive and confident, not aggressive or pushy. Nudges should also be quite short – fewer than 300 characters – so be as direct and concise as possible without coming off as curt. Use a voice that feels authentic to the sender and that encourages students to view positive behavior, such as adding assignment due dates to a digital calendar, as a social norm and salient behavior. Also, use language that frames behavior as part of a larger public commitment, like nudging around COVID-19 social distance practices, and makes students feel better about themselves for taking action.

Collaborate with campus partners. When nudging students, remember that they are interacting with a host of other campus partners. Buy-in from faculty is a useful way to connect your academic skill-building nudges with the learning that is happening in the classroom. Doing that will make nudges feel like a synergistic part of the students' educational experience rather than one-off, out-of-context reminders.

Also, when you use nudges as a way to drive students toward underutilized but important campus resources, always make sure you are not operating in isolation. You do not want to send a nudge to a large group of students reminding them of tutoring and academic support without first connecting with the team that provides that service.

In conclusion, for those who work directly with students, COVID-19 has undoubtedly caused great disruption to the normal practice of student learning, engagement and support. It has forced all of us to quickly pivot and rethink our normal approaches. Rebecca Solnit reminds us that humans have a distinct ability to do great altruistic, communitarian, resourceful and imaginative things in the face of a disaster. Now more than ever, we must look for creative ways to best support students as they face immeasurable levels of uncertainty, stress and fatigue.

Is text message-based nudging a magic bullet that can solve all of the issues facing higher education during this challenging period? No. But it can be an effective, scalable and efficient way to engage, support and encourage college students in this unprecedented time. ■

Bio

John M. Burdick is an associate director, and Emily Peeler is the program administrator, in the Office of Student Success at New York University.

Read Original Article ▸▸ https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2021/02/23/how-strong-nudge-campaign-can-improve-student-outcomes-during-covid-opinion

Faculty Members Are the Key to Solving the Retention Challenge

It is essential to build a culture of success for students in the classroom, department by department, writes Carl J. Strikwerda.

By Carl J. Strikwerda // September 4, 2019

The biggest challenge that America faces in higher education is graduating more of our students. Providing access to education is a major issue, but if students fail to finish, they can't gain the value of a postsecondary degree.

Nor can the United States remain competitive as a nation in the global economy. We once led the world in the percentage of college graduates in the adult population. Depending on which measure is used, we now rank as low as 19th. The decline is not because we send fewer young people to college than other nations do. The gap comes from our failure to graduate students, even after six years.

Why is this the case? For a large portion of young people, it's because they don't make adequate progress toward their degree. The United States has more than 3,000 four-year colleges and universities. The American Talent Initiative, using IPEDS data, has found that fewer than 300 of these institutions graduate at least 70 percent of their students within six years. Nationwide, only 59 percent of students graduate within six years. If we add in community colleges, the largest single sector within American higher education, the picture is more troubling still. Only 14 percent of community college students who say that they plan to get a four-year degree actually obtain one within six years of beginning community college.

The failure to have more students graduate is a human and financial tragedy. From the human perspective, it leaves millions of families with less of an opportunity to advance economically, embitters them toward society as a whole and dashes the dreams of young people for a better life. The financial implications are equally troubling. Millions of students leave college with loans that are all the more difficult to pay because they lack a degree to earn a higher income.

In fact, the student loan crisis is disproportionately a crisis for those without degrees. The likelihood of default is actually in inverse correlation to the size of the debt. Almost one in four of those with less than $5,000 in student debt are in default, while only 7 percent of those with more than $40,000 in student debt are in default. Meanwhile, colleges and universities collectively spend billions on students who do not graduate while still having to spend more to recruit, advise and teach new students to take their place.

On top of that, the students who suffer from this defeat are disproportionately those who can least afford a setback. The correlation between those who succeed or fail in college and students' family income is a close fit, even after controlling for test scores and high school grades.

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The higher the income of the parents, the likelier students will find a way to graduate. The lower the family income, all things considered, the more likely they will not.

Many of the students failing to graduate clearly have the intelligence and desire to succeed. True, many fail due to personal issues, finances, prior educational gaps or family problems. Too often, however, we in higher education have failed them. Advising, financial aid counseling, student support systems and campus climates all have to play critical roles in order to help students graduate.

The Most Direct Way

Even more important, the research and money being poured into help-

ing improve retention often doesn't flow to those who are crucial to student success: the faculty and department chairs, program directors, and deans who shape faculty culture. Faculty members are often the most direct way to help at-risk students.

Colleges and universities reach out to at-risk students in myriad ways, with registrars, advising centers and financial aid offices all playing important roles. Yet students may decide to ignore such efforts. By contrast, if students do not show up for class and turn in their work, failure is guaranteed. No matter what else colleges and universities do for students, success in the classroom is essential.

In the last analysis, then, it is instructors who control their fate. Colleges and universities can often do more, at less cost, to help at-risk students by concentrating on how to reach them most effectively in their academic work than by other means, as important as they may be.

Departmental culture, therefore, is also crucial to students graduating. Even at colleges and universities with low graduation rates, there are bright examples of departmental success. Conversely, at the three institutions where I worked over the last 20 years, all of which had admirable retention rates, the variance among departments could be striking. Some departments retained as many as 90 percent of their first-year students into the sophomore year, while others retained as few as 60 percent.

The best indicator, furthermore, is not retention in a department itself, given that as many as 30 percent of bachelor's degree students switch majors at least once in the first three years, and 9 percent change more than once. The best indicator is whether or not students leaving a major also leave the institution as a whole and fail to graduate. The engineering department at one college made a major contribution to the college's overall retention by quickly advising students who were failing about other possible majors. Rather than leaving the college, more of those students changed majors and graduated.

"Colleges and universities can often do more, at less cost, to help at-risk students by concentrating on how to reach them most effectively in their academic work than by other means, as important as they may be."

Far too little information exists on how to help academic departments ensure that students succeed, in spite of the obstacles that they face. What I have learned from my experience and the internal institutional data that I have worked with are the following:

- **Individual instructors – especially in the first semester and first year – make a huge difference.** If colleges are willing to collect data at a more granular level, it almost always reveals that certain professors have learned how to reach at-risk students effectively and teach them skills to survive at the college. Other instructors can, and should, learn from them.
- **Introductory courses are crucial make-or-break arenas.** Special care must be taken in developing curricula and creating opportunities in these courses for tutoring, office hours and study-skills sessions.
- **A slow ramp beats a deep dive.** At-risk students perform better if they take the most difficult courses at a measured pace, rather than a demanding load in the first semester. Departments with lower retention rates can consider redesigning their curricula and adding ways for at-risk students to catch up.
- **It's important to share relevant information widely.** Many

instructors, academic departments, department chairs and deans lack information on their role in retention and graduation. They typically would be happy to help their institutions do better in retention and graduation, but they don't have the data, examples of best practices or incentives to change their cultures. Providing such data and clear incentives, and sharing the best practices from the most successful faculty and departments, can make a major impact.

- **Non-tenure-track faculty members and adjuncts are essential partners.** Often, they teach the majority of first-year students. Many are experts at reaching at-risk students. They can share their insights with other instructors and benefit from more support and training on how to help improve retention.
- **Collaborative efforts pay off.** Culture eats strategy, if not for breakfast, as Peter Drucker may or may not have said, then at least by the time of the mid-morning coffee break. By fostering a culture of collaboration, departments can rally around the goal of retention and make a difference on their own, even if money, a strategic plan or leadership from above are absent.

At one university where I consulted, a department and the dean were at loggerheads over the department's insistence on running its own internal advising center for first-year and sophomore students. The duplication in effort and money seemed unwarranted. Then I talked to the department chair. She pointed out that her department had one of the highest retention rates, even controlling for students' background and preparation. She explained that the university advising center too often treated all courses, instructors and class schedules as the same. "With students at risk," she said, "we know that we have to steer them to certain instructors, certain classes and schedules, or we won't see them back in a year." Other departments that I've worked with at institutions large and small have revamped their first-year curricula so that at-risk students take an easier initial load, are monitored carefully and then helped to catch up or advised on other majors if they don't do well.

The goal for a department should be to help students do their best and keep them at the university, even if they switch majors. Too often, innovative departments are islands of success. They have helped at-risk students stay and graduate because a chair, veteran faculty member or dean created a culture where retention is a common goal.

Research, funding and leadership at the level of the university are essential if we are to change the trajectory of failure for millions of students. But just as important will be grassroots efforts – supported by presidents, accrediting bodies and foundations – to build a culture of success department by department. Making a change could help millions of students and their families, contribute to economic opportunity, burnish higher education's reputation, and restore a bit of faith in the American dream. ■

Bio

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Read Original Article ▸▸ https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2019/09/04/faculty-must-play-bigger-role-student-retention-and-success-opinion

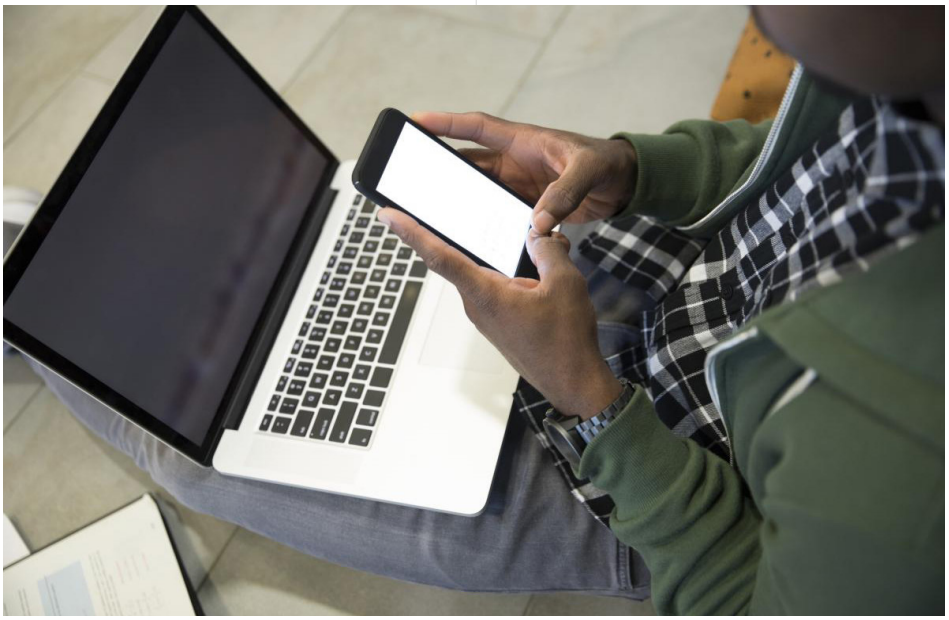
Reclaiming the Nudge

> The small interventions designed to influence student choices are neither panacea nor failure – but tools worthy of continuing experimentation, writes Kim Manturuk.

By Kim Manturuk // November 13, 2019

If you're looking for a textbook example of the hype cycle, look no further than the humble nudge.

The idea of nudges – small interventions that impact behavior – originated in behavioral economics, where researchers found that very small, subtle interventions could increase the likelihood that someone would take a desired action or make a positive choice. In just a few years, nudging has gone from inflated expectations to trough of disillusionment. It seems that every week a new article pops up claiming that nudging doesn't work, but is that claim itself just hype?



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After three years of research and experimentation, we at Duke's Teaching and Learning Innovation Lab are inclined to say yes. Our research suggests that the failure is not in the nudge itself, but in mistaken use of the term "nudge" to refer to virtually any intervention designed to create incremental behavior change. In fact, when designed appropriately, nudging still shows great potential to improve student outcomes and support positive decision pathways.

In 2008, the University of Chicago economist Richard H. Thaler and Harvard Law School professor Cass R. Sunstein published the book *Nudge: Improving Decisions About Health, Wealth, and Happiness,* and seemingly overnight, nudging was everywhere: restaurants found that people recycle more when the trash bin was labeled "landfill," governments saw their back tax payments increase when they added a handwritten note on the collection notice and schools found that students bought more healthy foods when those options were placed at eye level along a cafeteria line.

Higher education took note, launching a flood of experiments to see if nudging could be an answer to persistent challenges large and small. Such nudge-based interventions included attempts to increase the number of underrepresented minority applicants to selective universities, reminding students to fill out financial aid forms and encouraging students at risk of failing to seek tutoring help. Yet in spite of a vast body of literature suggesting that these interventions should work, many of them didn't.

The impact of nudging has thus far been mixed. Both the FAFSA nudge and the nudge aimed at increasing college applications from low-income qualified students found no significant effects when replicated at scale. Some nudges have even backfired: a nudge intended to motivate students to study more by showing them how they compared to their peers actually caused low-performing students to study

less and even drop out.

However, some nudges have shown promise. Georgia State University found that offering customized messages, instead of form letters, reminding students of pre-matriculation tasks reduced the number of enrolled students who never showed up on campus by 21 percent. Several other universities found that slightly reducing the size of dorm rooms while offering expanded common spaces increased student retention and collaboration.

So why do some nudges work while others do not? Quite simply, many of these failed nudges aren't nudges at all; they're nags. And no one likes being nagged.

A nudge, as opposed to a nag, leverages cognitive heuristics to prompt slight behavior changes without people consciously reacting to the nudge. In other words, a nudge isn't something you realize you're getting, and the result isn't something you think too much about. A nudge happens in the background of your daily life, and it works best when the goal is to slightly increase a positive outcome.

For example, you can nudge people to recycle their empty can instead of throwing it in the trash by labeling the trash can "landfill," but getting a reminder to do an annoying, time-consuming task like filling out a FAFSA is more likely to cause annoyance than to motivate action.

Duke University's Teaching and Learning Innovation Lab recently completed a pilot test of a nudge designed to help students remember more of the material they learn in lecture classes by sending them text messages with short multiple-choice questions. By prompting students to actively recall a small bit of information from a lecture, it shifts the "forgetting curve" and helps students remember more, longer. Our evaluation found that students who received these nudges had slightly higher final course grades (1.43 percentage points, significant at $p<0.05$) than students who did not.

So what is the future of nudging in higher education? We think it is important to be realistic about what nudges can and can't do. This is not to say that researchers shouldn't continue exploring the impacts of reminders and, yes, even nags.

There are likely some student behaviors that can be motivated by persistent reminders, but we should be careful not to call these nudges. Nudging should be considered when the goal is to create small, incremental changes in student choices, not effect large behavior changes.

Finally, we hope to see more collaborative, cross-university research on nudges. By working together and sharing our research, we can all advance our understanding of how to best use nudges to help students succeed. ■

Bio

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Read Original Article ▸▸ https://www.insidehighered.com/digital-learning/views/2019/11/13/dont-give-nudge-it-can-still-help-students-opinion

Enough!

Colleges and high schools need to change the way they are creating needless pressure on students, writes Jessica Binkley.

By Jessica Binkley // April 19, 2021

Choosing a college is a big decision – one that is often viewed as a defining moment and can be difficult, even agonizing, for the student. High school seniors today are afraid of making a mistake. Worried about getting somewhere and it not being the right place for them. This is because they desire to find a school that fits their personality and meets their emotional and academic needs, and at the top of their list is a place where they experience comradery with other students. Despite what students say they want, many are selecting institutions based on rankings, reputations and degrees offered over compatibility.

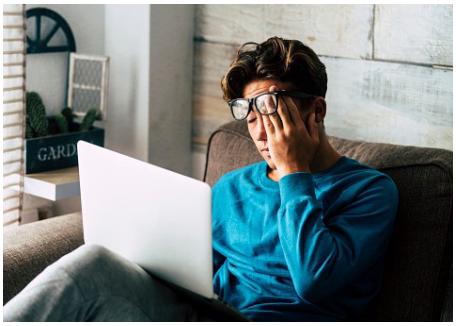
The pressure on every high school senior can be felt by these two questions:

"Where are you going to college?" and "What are you majoring in?"

It's April, and the stress is apparent in every high school across the nation. May 1, Decision Day, is just around the corner, and the number of students who have yet to commit is higher than ever. Why is this? The answer is partly a result of the pandemic, which has limited in-person college visits and access to the SAT and ACT, but the truth is teenagers have always wrestled with choosing a college and a major.

While the majority of students pick a major during the admissions process, 80 percent of college students change it at least once during their undergraduate career. We are taught from the time we start kindergarten that we should know what we want to be when we grow up. Therefore, students who reach their senior year and are unsure begin to panic. Everyone around them has been telling them they should know what they want to do. Those of us who have been through this realize every decision we make is just one step on our journey; our path is filled with challenges, side steps and even a few U-turns. Therefore, why do we expect students to declare a major before they even start exploring? Being undecided – or the new catch term for it, "exploratory" – should no longer be shamed. It is a bold understanding of the options that lie ahead.

Placing less emphasis on a major is also key to finding the right college. Many times, students look only at institutions that have high rankings in their potential field and miss out on others that may be more of what they were hoping for in a college. My son found a university where he felt comfortable and was encouraged to be himself. This was priceless, as he started as a graphic design major and quickly changed to physics. If he had focused on a potential degree and less on belonging he would have ended up at the wrong institution.



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Students dream about that aha moment of "This is where I belong." Unfortunately, it doesn't happen for everyone with our current means of recruiting. Admissions counselors get wrapped up in SAT scores, service hours and AP course work; they forget there is a person behind the data. Then you have high school guidance counselors, who are supposed to provide student support, pushing institutions not for the sake of the student, but because they construct an image of solid college preparedness for them and their school.

Approximately one-third of college students transfer before obtaining a degree. This is not only costly for the student, who has to transfer credits and potentially take additional course work, but also a huge retention issue for institutions. What if students and admissions counselors focused more on fit and less on bragging rights? So often students are encouraged to accept admission to a school based on its

ranking rather than its compatibility. My daughter was one of these students. She is a graduate of the University of Florida. Although she is happy to be a Gator now, her first two years, trying to navigate being on her own and making friends, were rough. Had she attended a smaller institution with more individualized attention, she may have had a better beginning. Why did she choose UF? Her high school guidance counselor told her it was the best college she got into and that other students would gladly take her place.

The problem today is that students and colleges alike are making selections based on criteria that are important for acceptance to the institution, but not the ingredients necessary for a student to stay at that institution and succeed.

Students hunger for a place where they belong. An institution that rewards exploration, encourages them to be their best self and assists them in acquiring a degree in a field they are passionate about. The most successful college graduates are those who flourish not only in the classroom but define their values and develop relationship skills. They experience the world through fantastic professors who spark curiosity and promote risk taking. This is what college students seek – a place to grow as individuals and feel at home.

Students long to be seen and valued as a person. Knowing they are wanted and sought after by a college or university not only boosts their self-esteem, it also creates a connection. An acceptance letter is nice, fireworks on the computer screen letting one know they were accepted is a momentary relief, but truly students yearn for a sense of belonging. College visits are crucial to solidifying a match. However, this is one of the largest socioeconomic impacts in the admissions process. It is expensive to visit a college campus. There are travel expenses as well as food and lodging. For many this is not possible and therefore increases the struggle and hardship in finding the right fit.

In this constantly changing time of college admissions, where accepting a student based solely on their application and test scores can no longer be the norm, there is opportunity to set new goals and standards. Compatibility is not acquired by acceptance alone. The best fit is discovered when counselors take the time to get to know their prospective students and orchestrate building relationships with faculty and peers who can help them grow as individuals, not just earn credits for a degree.

The pandemic has broken the mold of college admissions and replaced it with a plethora of possibilities. Students need to evaluate institutions by asking questions like "How will this school encourage me to explore my areas of interest?" "In what ways will this school influence my choices and decisions?" "How will it challenge me?" And on the flip side, admissions counselors need to be asking, "How will this student contribute to the community?" and "Do we have the resources to help this student excel?" When we change the script and focus on compatibility, it is a win-win for both students and institutions. Now it is time to be fearless, bust the box and forge ahead creating a new model for college admissions and selection. ■

Bio

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