



Five Steps to Improve the Student Experience in Higher Education

By John Knost and Joseph A. DeFeo

 **Attain** Partners

The student experience is how students interact with the institution's faculty, staff, and other students, irrespective of the mode of interaction

Over the past decade, the rapid advancement in using digital technologies in most industries is known as the digital experience (DX). It has been developing quickly outside of higher education, and has only increased students' expectations for digital interaction with their colleges and universities as a result. Unfortunately, higher education institutions have lagged private industry in the use of technology, and now the gap in DX quality will only grow wider. One cannot think about the DX unless one also understands the SX, or student experience.

The student experience is how students interact with the institution's faculty, staff, and other students, irrespective of the mode of interaction (e.g., web, mobile, in-person, phone).

The student experience encompasses all aspects of a student's life at an institution. Everything from admissions, onboarding, academic instructions, institutional facilities, and student activities programming to athletics and graduation (and more!) influences the student experience.

David Steele-Figueroa, President of Woodbury University in Burbank, CA, describes the student experience this way: "...what we try to do at Woodbury University, California is to get students passionate (or not!) when they interface with the business office, financial aid, the director of the residence halls, or their many professors. Do they have input on important campus matters like safety and the quality of the food? Are customer (student) reviews collected to improve student expectations of value? Does the student's interface with the President and other members of the cabinet create a sense of shared accountability? The point is that students need to have a voice. And the administration needs to listen. Yes, we are formally taught to write and to speak, but many of us are not taught to listen or to think about the softer intangibles." What Woodbury University is doing is listening to the voice of their students and using that information to transform the student experience they have into a digital student experience that they long for.

If you want your university to be competitive and attract the best students, your system must look at the level of satisfaction and dissatisfaction associated with the technology, processes, and interfaces between the students and the administrators and faculty. Although this is a new focus for most higher education institutions, there are five steps you should consider before making improvements to your student experience or moving towards a digital experience.



Step 1: Listen to the Voice of the Students

Listening to the voice of your students will enable you to focus on what matters most to them. Following along the lessons learned from other universities, Attain Partners has been working with higher education institutions to improve the student experience, which includes the multitude of ways a student interacts with an institution, such as:

Types of Interactions	Purposes of Interactions	Modes of Interactions
Student to Faculty	Academic Instruction + Advising	Mobile
Student to Staff	Communicating with Peers	Web
Peer to Peer (Individual or group)	View and Update Student Data	Email
	Career Information + Advising	SMS
	Reminders and Instructions	Social Media



Step 2: Assess Your Organization – Get a Health Check

Student services are compartmentalized, with students often viewed through the specific job functions faculty or staff perform. Business processes and systems are not often planned strategically and tend to lack integration, resulting in a disjointed and unsatisfying student experience. In other words, students become frustrated and disappointed! For example, students having to seek answers from multiple business units (e.g., admissions, financial aid) takes time and may not result in a satisfactory result.

Once you begin to think about students as customers, you will find that every interaction they have with an institution can improve.

Sources of student dissatisfaction are often overlooked. Once you begin to think about students as customers, you will find that every interaction they have with an institution can improve. To better understand where the dissatisfaction comes from, universities should consider conducting an independent review of the services and processes that impact students. Conducting a ‘health check’ will enable the system to identify and prioritize the opportunities for improvement.

An effective assessment must include stakeholder feedback, input from students, a high-level review of services, programs, and processes, and the value each brings to the student experience and to the university.

Under the leadership of Peter Konwerski, former Dean of Student Affairs at George Washington University and current Vice President for Student Life at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, GW focused on improving the student experience. He stated that:

“GW created a culture of assessment, which included learning assessments as well as dashboards that track usage and satisfaction data on the student experience. These tools have helped Student Affairs not only tell its story during the recent accreditation processes but also continually hone its programming designed to improve student retention and support efforts.”



Step 3: Develop a Student Experience Strategy

Develop a strategy to determine where to improve the student experience and provide guiding principles for deploying that strategy.

An exceptional student experience strategy encourages meaningful interactions between students, faculty, and staff.

An exceptional student experience strategy encourages meaningful interactions between students, faculty, and staff, which result in profound personal relationships that foster students’ academic, developmental, and career success.

“Our guiding strategy of a high-touch, high-tech approach to the student experience has been made possible through the relationships we’ve established, and the technology provided by using a technology system used in many businesses for managing its customers, called Salesforce,” said Tom Matthews, Associate Dean at Case Western University.

They are seeing results in retention and graduation rates as business processes, students, and technology are integrated. Areas of continuous improvement have been to:

- ▶ Enhance onboarding
- ▶ Create a great first-year experience
- ▶ Provide data to proactively advise students

- ▶ Enable early exposure to career planning
- ▶ Expand access to experiential learning activities
- ▶ Enhance student support services (by removing wasted tasks and obstacles)
- ▶ Foster a success-oriented mindset and sense of belonging
- ▶ Remove institutional obstacles to success

The classroom experience is especially important. Students who succeed feel that their classes are relevant and engaging and that their professors genuinely care about their learning and success. Active learning is valuable not only because it can contribute significantly to improved skills development and better command of the material, but because it engages students in their own learning.



Step 4: Design or Enhance to a Digital Experience

Digital experience is not a panacea that can resolve every challenge with student experience. However, a well-crafted strategy that includes digital technology can dramatically improve students' interactions with staff, faculty, and other students. To be effective, the planning must work with other technology, such as a CRM, to seamlessly tie together student interactions, both digital and analog. Therefore, digital experience planning should be managed within the context of the overall student experience.

In addition, it is important to consider business process changes and build a unified communication strategy that creates opportunities to maximize the effectiveness of digital interactions.

Undoubtedly, students desire easy access to their data and information with robust self-service capabilities. However, the institution must not view self-service as the goal; it is merely a tool which enhances the institution's ability to build relationships with its students.

Digital experience should promote deeper relationships by:

- ▶ **Making interactions easier** – Students not only have a relationship with faculty, staff, and other students, but a larger relationship with the institution. The easier it is for the students to interact and complete tasks, the more satisfied students will be with that relationship.
- ▶ **Creating seamless service** – Higher education is typically heavily siloed and bureaucratic. This can create service challenges. Carefully planning self-service can breakdown those silos, thereby, improving the relationship between the student and institution.
- ▶ **Increasing staff time to focus on significant issues** – Faculty and staff time is limited. Minimizing the amount of time spent on mundane interactions (e.g., routine questions or tasks) frees time for meaningful interactions that truly build a relationship with the student.

Here are a few examples of how universities improved the student experience and hence the digital experience simultaneously:

- ▶ Researchers at the City University of New York (CUNY) and the Graduate Center, have developed Commons In A Box (CBOX), an open-source software kit for running a shared community space to exchange ideas, research, and data.
- ▶ The University of Southern California and in the Alliance for Networking

Digital experience planning should be managed within the context of the overall student experience.

Visual Culture are building Scalar, a common platform for publishing interactive, rich-media scholarship in emerging genres on the open web.

- ▶ The University of Oklahoma uses chatbots to direct readers to immediate access to its library information 24/7, navigate library databases or catalogs, and to locate other needed information in the user's native language.
- ▶ Google Chromecast can enlarge images for visually impaired individuals. Other helpful resources include VR screen readers, such as VoiceOver and TalkBack, which give users eyes-free control of their devices.
- ▶ Google Glass apps and 2D barcode camera phone scanning can benefit deaf students by turning QR-coded learning objects into augmented reality projections that display American Sign Language (ASL) related videos.
- ▶ Immersive and blended virtual reality, artificial reality, and augmented reality to help users on the autism spectrum recognize facial emotions and improve their social skills.



Step 5: Develop a Change Management Plan

The final step is to develop a comprehensive change management plan that can act on the opportunities to improve the student experience and make it more effective and more digital. This plan should include support from external experts to help manage the obstacles that often get in the way as well as engage students, faculty, and administrative staff. Another way to describe this step is, "How much can we make happen, and how fast?"

*How much can we
make happen, and
how fast?*

Are You Ready?

If your institution is looking to begin a transformation of the student experience or interested in creating a new strategic direction, Attain Partners is up for the challenge. We can collaboratively bring our experiences working with Salesforce and Workday to life, helping your university in engaging students with the tools they will need.

Not just powering the future—empowering it.

Based in McLean, Va., Attain Partners is a leading management, technology, and compliance consulting firm delivering services and solutions to advance client missions across the education, nonprofit, healthcare, and state and local government landscapes. We're an innovative and values-driven firm working to disrupt the status quo to change the world and improve the lives of those we serve.

For more information, contact us at info@attainpartners.com.