

7 Questions to Consider When Buying a Student Information System

YOUR CHECKLIST WHEN INVESTING IN A MODERN SIS



Jenzabar®

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Is Today's SIS Enough?

Today's higher education institutions are being asked to perform at a much higher level of efficacy for a more diverse student body than ever before. Institutions need innovative, future-proof student information systems (SIS) that can help them make quick, data-informed decisions that balance their short- and long-term visions and encourage creative and engaging student experiences.

A powerful student information system can help higher education institutions meet specific markers of student success that can include:

- ▶ Increasing student engagement.
- ▶ Increasing student retention rates.
- ▶ Improving learning outcomes.
- ▶ Preparing graduates for the workforce.
- ▶ Increasing access to learning for underserved communities.

These are just a few examples. What is clear is that today's higher education student has a different story than what many of us remember even 10 to 20 years ago. The 18-year-old, first-year student who is fresh out of high school and dependent upon his or her parent's savings to pay for college no longer fits the narrative for most students today.

College Students Today

27% are adult learners

38% are older than 25

25% are parents

58% have jobs



A Snapshot of Today's College Student

According to a 2019 study by marketing firm Lipman Hearne, adult learners make up about 27 percent of the nation's undergraduate student population.¹ These students are juggling multiple roles and responsibilities at work, at home, and in their communities. Among today's undergraduate students, you will find that 38 percent are over the age of 25, more than 25 percent are parents, and 58 percent are working while pursuing their studies, according to EAB.²

We also know that today's student is tech-savvy—particularly Millennials and Generation Z learners; they were born with access to information at their fingertips via mobile technology and find it frustrating to learn in an environment that does not reflect that experience. Higher education institutions need to follow suit. Institutions are now grappling to find increasingly meaningful ways to engage more students in a shorter amount of time.

So how can higher education leaders use a student information system to support this group of sophisticated learners?

A Modern SIS for the Modern Student

A student information system is a technological innovation used across the higher education environment to manage student data. Traditionally, the SIS was used to improve basic higher education functions like documenting student information, course registration, and grades. But can a modern SIS accomplish more?

Let's look at seven questions you should consider when deciding to invest in a modern SIS.

1. Will the SIS be flexible enough to evolve as our priorities shift or change?
2. Does the SIS offer robust data management and analysis capabilities?
3. Why should the SIS be in the cloud?
4. Is the SIS easy to use?
5. Does the SIS integrate well with other solutions?
6. Does the system deliver comprehensive security capabilities?
7. What kind of support and training services can be expected from the vendor?

As student demands change, you need access to innovative tools that address evolving student expectations. A modern SIS can help you attend to the needs of stakeholders across campus, including students, faculty, staff, and administrators.

Let's dig a bit deeper into why you should keep these elements in mind when considering a student information system.

Question 1: Will the SIS be flexible enough to evolve as your priorities shift or change?

With technology evolving at breakneck speeds, stagnation is a major concern that institutions have regarding their current SIS. In many cases, the existing student information system used today was built on outdated technology, which is hampering the ability to make decisions that move the institution forward. CIOs and other institutional leaders may have had to piece together solutions that worked in the short term but are no longer supporting the mission of your institution.

One of the most important questions you need to ask yourself when in the market for a new SIS is whether the solution will grow with your institution. An institution's success is dependent on the success of its students. This goal can only be met if staff, administration, and faculty are given the resources they need to fulfill their roles.

As the student body evolves, you need to ensure that your student information systems will transform and scale in tow. Here are a few basic guidelines to help understand what to look for when assessing the long-term viability of a modern SIS.

How scalable is the architecture?

As your institution sets its sights on growth, make sure that your SIS is built using an architecture that nurtures a life-long relationship from prospective students to alumni and all the spaces in between. Your SIS must be scalable enough to support your institution's mission to drive student success even as the student body increases in size.

It should also be flexible enough to capture and manage myriad information from student life services, campus services, and more. The point here is to ensure that your SIS provides access to rich data across the entire student experience. This gives you the power to create more fulfilling collaborative relationships across departments and better student experiences.

Is the SIS adaptable?

A modern SIS should be adaptable and easy to use for all users across all departments, including financial aid, student services, and more teams. External factors like the economy or industry regulations and internal factors like shifting student requirements will have a role in how institutions manage student data and relationships. Different users across campus should be able to apply changes to the SIS—or at least the areas within the system that they use—without breaking the solution or compromising anyone’s ability to remain focused on enabling student success.

57%

of students said “self-service tools for conducting student-related business” are the most useful online success tools for institutions.

Educause³



Does the SIS cater to unique student requirements?

The proliferation of nontraditional students has forced institutions to rethink how they serve this crop of students. Students are looking for flexible learning options that support their need to juggle life and family responsibilities. These are the students who are looking for flexible schedules as well as options for alternative pathways to demonstrate competencies or complete certificate and degree programs. A modern SIS should be able to capture data that relates to when and how learning is taking place so you can make adjustments to improve student outcomes, if necessary.

Student demographics are shifting, and those changes are bringing about new user expectations, especially as students use new devices for nearly every aspect of their always-connected lives. As the foundation of your institution’s student engagement strategy, your SIS should enable robust self-service capabilities to empower all users, including traditional and nontraditional students. Given the growing diversity among students, your SIS should allow users to engage with their institution (including faculty and staff) through the means of their choice via self-service, on-demand, multichannel options.

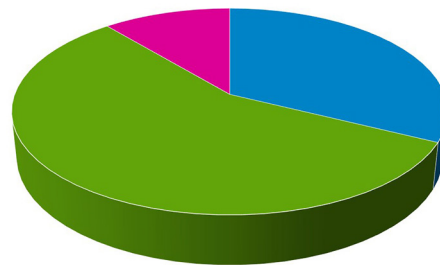
Question 2: Does the SIS offer robust data management and analysis capabilities?

Data is a foundational component of higher education institutions. The challenge for today's institutions is that they are being inundated by data—sometimes to the point in which decision-makers are getting lost in the processes of inputting and managing information. A modern student information system should ease this challenge, allowing faculty, staff, administrators, and students to access information that is easy to understand and can aid critical data-informed decision-making processes.

Does the SIS drive student enrollment?

Admissions and enrollment processes are complex, but they provide a lot of insight if the data associated with those operations is gathered and used effectively. The right SIS can make these student-centric processes a lot smoother by tracking prospective students from their initial inquiry to admissions to actual enrollment. Regardless if your institution is term-based or leverages open enrollment, early exit, or some combination, your SIS should be able to use enrollment and admissions data to support your academic programs.

Your SIS should also use student data to enable hassle-free, online payment processing. The SIS should update the student's profile as he or she transitions from one stage to the next. The result is having all student data integrated into one system rather than having separate systems.



Would a data analytics tool or platform help you or your department to make more informed strategic decisions?

56% Yes, probably

32% Yes, definitely

11% No, probably not

University Business ⁴

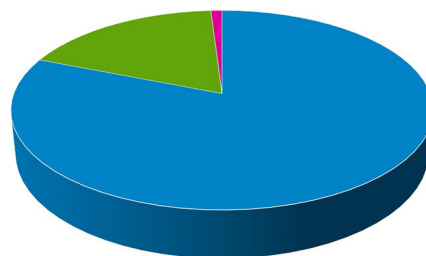
Does the SIS use data and analytics to improve student success?

It's possible to implement a modern SIS that uses predictive analytics to identify and quantify multiple variables that are in alignment with your institution's student success plan. Faculty should be able to use the SIS to engage students and improve success by looking at metrics such as pre-test scores and monitoring which students are logging into the course system. This offers realistic insight that can help you reward students that are performing well in addition to creating strategies that support students in need of resources.

How does the SIS improve student retention?

What are your institution's retention and completion rates? Which students are at risk and why? These are central questions that lie at the heart of the mission of any higher education institution. An SIS can be a vital contributor to creating a strategy that ensures your ability to serve students in ways that maximize their potential. Student retention responsibilities spread far and wide across campus, touching multiple departments and roles. That's why an SIS should house dashboards and/or real-time reporting capabilities. Student risk factors are different at each institution, however, so recording baseline information such as SAT/ACT scores or the education and income of a student's parents may help in predicting how an institution can support a student's success. Alert systems can identify which students may be at risk while also keeping tabs on which personnel on campus have engaged with the student.

An SIS can play a major role in supporting your institution's mission of driving student success. The data in the SIS should be captured and harnessed in ways that enable staff, faculty, and administrators to engage with and empower students to meet their goals as the institution grows over time.



Has your institution made improving student success and completion rates a strategic priority for the near future?

81% Yes, this is a top priority for the near future

18% Yes, this is important, but not a top priority

1% No, this is not a priority for our institution

University Business

Question 3: Why should the SIS be in the cloud?

Many benefits come hand in hand with using cloud technologies, including the opportunity to reduce operating expenses, improve data security, and the option to free up IT staff to work on other strategic campus initiatives. Overall, the cloud can help make the entire higher education ecosystem much more productive. These benefits are similarly associated with using a cloud student information system.

Does the SIS support on-demand scalability?

An SIS that operates via the cloud can be scaled on demand. This flexibility and option to expand according to capacity are important for the student information system, especially during times of high traffic, e.g., during course registration. When students are registering for classes, the SIS must be able to support the rapid influx of users accessing the system simultaneously. Similarly, you should be able to scale back during quieter times, e.g., summer vacation, when fewer students will be online. When the SIS is in the cloud, this flexibility is built-in.

Additionally, a cloud student information system offers a cost-effective method to upgrade both communication and overall system upgrades without the need for heavy investment in IT infrastructure.

Does the SIS have comprehensive disaster recovery capabilities?

Higher education institutions need to be fully prepared in the case of a disaster. Whether that disaster is related to inclement weather or a malicious third party with the intent to cause harm, a cloud-based disaster recovery system can give institutions the power to recover data quickly with little to no interruptions. When your information is stored in the cloud, the system automatically creates backup copies of student records and other pertinent information that can be restored quickly.

Is the SIS future-proof?

One of the many benefits of upgrading to cloud architecture is that it eliminates the hassle of creating an IT infrastructure that may become obsolete in only a few years. Everything you need to ensure that your SIS is fully functional is available in the cloud 24X7. This means you never have to worry about legacy hardware, infrastructure, processes for disaster recovery, failover, security concerns, or software upgrades.

If your institution is focused on becoming more competitive either locally, nationally, or internationally, it is important to consider upgrading legacy systems to the cloud, which can offer more secure experiences in a flexible, easily upgradeable platform. Yet, it is also important that you should move to the cloud at a pace that suits your institution's needs. A pragmatic approach to the cloud will likely yield substantial benefits and opportunities.





Question 4: Is the SIS easy to use?

Because an SIS is accessed by so many users across campus, including faculty, staff, IT, and students, the system should be intuitive, utilize easy-to-understand language, and, most of all, be universally accessible.

There are several elements of an SIS that can make it more user friendly for all parties.

Does the SIS prioritize user experience?

A user experience that feels smooth and natural can produce the kind of experience Millennial and Generation Z learners have come to expect. Your student information system should ensure that the entire student engagement process from application to registration and beyond is seamless and intuitive, regardless of whether the interaction is happening on a desktop, laptop, or smartphone.

48%

of higher education organizations
say they are hosting their SIS
in the cloud.

Extreme Networks ⁵

Faculty and staff can also benefit from a more efficient experience as well. Small details across the SIS like the typeface, use of plain language, and natural prompts make a world of difference. When the SIS eases daily tasks like accessing student information, inputting grades, and retrieving data reports on demand, departments can save time and money.

Does the SIS support single sign-on capabilities?

Single sign-on (SSO) functionality makes it easy for users to sign into the SIS for a variety of services across campus. The capability consists of a centralized session and user authentication service where one login credential can be used to access a variety of other services across the campus environment. Students expect their digital experiences to be fluid without the hassle of logging in and out each time.

Is the SIS accessible to all?

Overall, your SIS should be able to facilitate better communication for everyone on and off campus. The onscreen text should be easily readable. The SIS should also be available on any desktop or mobile device using any browser. This allows your institution to extend the reach of departments and allows faculty and staff to meet students where and how they want. Ultimately, this grants staff more freedom in how they deliver support, which can contribute to better student experiences.

A modern SIS should take notes from regularly used applications and websites like Google or Facebook. Buttons, icons, sounds, and touchscreens create a visual element that makes using the SIS a more intuitive experience. Ensuring that your SIS is easy to use by everyone on the campus is part of what creates an inclusive campus. It allows for the free flow of information for students, faculty, and staff so that your institution can become more transparent and collaborative.

The modern SIS needs to be user friendly, promote a desirable user experience, and be accessible to users across campus. The system should be intuitive enough for new users to adopt with relative ease, albeit with training. In your hunt for a new student information system, accessibility and usability should be priorities.

Question 5: Does the SIS integrate well with other solutions?

The SIS is a core piece of a connected campus, as it is the central system for student information. Without the SIS, monitoring and evaluating institutional effectiveness would be incomplete. When evaluating a new SIS, you need to consider how that SIS will plug into existing systems and how well data is integrated across departments.

Will the SIS integrate with existing solutions on campus?

Institutions use many systems across campus and need an effective way to integrate and move data between applications to remain efficient. When looking at a student information system, you should focus on the ease of integration between the SIS and other solutions and data transfer mechanics, e.g. real-time transfers, scheduled transfers like off-hours, and one-way or two-way approaches.

Likewise, with the appropriate integrations and APIs with your ERP system and other solutions, a student information system can strengthen collaboration between departments and can make constituent lifecycle management more effective. For example, the admissions office uses many different solutions to prospect and enroll students. That information needs to move into the registrar's office and services offices, as well as the advancement office following graduation, etc. The SIS can make up the core of this lifecycle management by centrally storing student data and sharing it with other departments across campus via integrations.

Does the SIS support the objectives of a connected campus?

As universities work diligently to beef up digital networks to support learning goals, it makes sense to utilize an SIS that functions within the same network. Your learning management system (LMS) and other core solutions should integrate into your SIS. This will enable all student information to be easily shared with the system that manages classroom, online, and hybrid learning arrangements.

Additionally, a modern student information system should support modern communications methods used by today's students. When faculty and staff communicate and collaborate with individuals through their preferred channels, they will enable better engagement and students will have better overall experiences.

The student information system should be one of the foundational pieces of your institution's IT environment, as it focuses on your core target: students. If the information on your students is properly shared across teams and systems, you will likely have happier and more successful students and faculty.



Question 6: Does the system deliver comprehensive security capabilities?

Hundreds of data breaches happen every year despite education policy requirements to implement reasonable security measures. According to Verizon's 2019 Data Breach Investigations Report, 80 percent of those breaches are attributed to miscellaneous errors, web application attacks, and other similar scenarios in the education sector.⁶ A modern SIS must support an institution's efforts in meeting security goals.

Understanding what's at risk

Failing to ensure the security of student information can have severe consequences, including significant fines, damaged public reputations, and the loss of student trust. Legacy systems and unpatched software represent some of the largest spaces for potential threats to data safety in higher education institutions. Phishing scams were once easily identified via emails riddled with poor spelling and obvious grammatical errors. Today, emails are designed to resemble common sign-in processes that appear to come from legitimate university email addresses. Ransomware attacks can even infect the university network in a matter of minutes.⁷

80%

of breaches in the education sector are attributed to miscellaneous errors, web application attacks, and other similar scenarios.

Verizon

A modern SIS needs to have data security capabilities that protect students, staff, and administrators from a possible data breach. Here are some security considerations when evaluating a new student information system.

Is the SIS in the cloud?

Contrary to what was once popular belief, a cloud-based platform can help secure data and prevent the loss of sensitive information. The cloud can transmit information with multiple layers of encryption so that it cannot easily be hacked. Having your data in the cloud means that sensitive information is stored on a centralized platform that is managed through role-based access.

Does the SIS control access to information based on roles?

All users within the SIS should not have the same level of access to the system. That means that certain roles have priority access over other administrators that allow them to control the flow of information across the system or to other users. Administrators should be able to customize and set up rules and permissions within the student information system that govern who has access to what information and when. These roles can extend to both students as well as staff to ensure individuals are only able to access the information associated with their specific needs. Roles-based privileges enable more granular control over highly sensitive data, which can mitigate the risk of data loss or compromise.



Does the SIS offer field encryption and data masking?

Two major types of cybersecurity attacks are prevalent on university campuses today: distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks and ransomware. A DDoS attack temporarily or indefinitely interrupts the flow of online services, rendering the entire university system useless. Ransomware attacks threaten to publish student data or block access to it until a ransom is paid.

Data encryption and masking provides increased data security by scrambling readable text that can only be read by the person in possession of the decryption key. These capabilities ensure that only the applicable users are accessing confidential information. Your student information system should have these and other security capabilities that can mitigate risk. Your SIS should also be supported by a team of security personnel that can aid in combatting increasingly complex cybersecurity challenges.

Does the SIS comply with industry standards?

There are serious consequences when institutions fail to comply with industry standards. One of the most widely known standards in higher education is the Federal Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), the federal law governing access to educational information and records. However, there are other standards to think about, including the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) and others. Failure to comply with these laws can potentially lead to loss of federal funding, lawsuits, or worse. Institutions can also suffer from damaged reputations that can lead to fewer alumni donations and lower student application rates. A modern SIS needs to comply with the industry's standards and best practices. It is possible to incorporate training about such laws into general employee and student orientation.

Your SIS should be created with all security challenges and solutions in mind so it can grow with your institution without introducing unnecessary data privacy or protection concerns. Everything from preventing data breaches to adhering to federal compliance with privacy laws can and should be addressed with the right system.



83% of higher education IT leaders in 2019 said IT data security was their top priority, yet only 34% said their initiatives were "excellent."

2019 Campus Computing Project 8

Question 7: What kind of customer support and training can be expected from the SIS vendor?

Higher education institutions need to work with trusted partners that are dedicated to supporting the growth of the organization. Here are some considerations when selecting a long-term solution partner.

Have you taken the time to define your priorities?

Whether you are purchasing the SIS for one campus or multiple campuses, it is important to ensure that you know what challenges your institution is facing. Take some time with your staff to visualize the ideal outcome of an SIS implementation. Your technology partner should be able to present the ideal choice that fits your needs and your budget.

Does your technology partner understand your institution's culture?

Every higher education institution has its own culture or way of providing education to its students. That culture heavily depends upon the kind of student you serve. An institution where most of the students live on campus provides a very different experience from an institution that serves commuting or online students. The ideal SIS should address the daily reality of your students, staff, faculty, and administration.

Does your technology partner provide ongoing training and support?

Training and support are critical when rolling out a new student information system. Initial training and hand-off services should be included in your agreement with the vendor. Your SIS partner should be able to train new staff on how to use the platform in everyday and anomalous situations.

Some things to consider can include the following: Does your SIS provide a searchable online library of common questions? Are there live technicians who are available to chat online or on the phone? Will these technicians be available 24X7 or only during traditional business hours? Will you need additional support during high-volume times like class registration?

Does your technology partner have a proven track record?

Any technology company you partner with should have a proven track record of reliability and excellent customer service. Your vendor should be able to implement a new student information system on your campus within the time and cost restraints initially outlined in your agreement. You want to know that your concerns are of their highest priority and that they are ready to go above and beyond to meet the needs of your students, faculty, and staff.

Be sure to ask about other colleges and universities your partner has worked with to see if their SIS is helping to meet institutional goals.



A Unified Cloud Platform for Higher Ed

Jenzabar One is a modern cloud platform built exclusively for higher education. As a unified suite of solutions and services, Jenzabar One powers your digital campus, drives institutional and student success, and accelerates innovation and growth.



Jenzabar SONIS

Powerful technology. Amazingly affordable.

Jenzabar SONIS is a powerful student information system that unites campus operations on a single platform. With Jenzabar SONIS, growing and specialized institutions can overcome resource constraints, empower their students' success, and achieve their missions.



Seamlessly Integrate Your Entire Campus

An integration platform-as-a-service (iPaaS) offering that enables you to build, manage, monitor, and deploy APIs across campus-wide on-premises and cloud applications through a single, user-friendly dashboard.

About Jenzabar

Created out of a passion for education and a vision for technology, Jenzabar offers disruptive, innovative software solutions and services that empower students' success and helps higher education institutions meet the demands of the modern student. Over 1,350 higher educational campuses harness Jenzabar solutions for improved performance across campus and a more personalized and connected experience for the student. For further information, please visit jenzabar.com or on twitter @Jenzabar or LinkedIn.

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