

2020

REDESIGNING THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE

HOW TO BEST RECRUIT AND RETAIN
STUDENTS IN UNCERTAIN TIMES

Including a
customizable
student journey
mapping
template!

TARGET 



TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....2

CHANGING STUDENT DEMOGRAPHICS DEMAND NEW
PERSPECTIVES.....3

DESIGN-THINKING PRACTICES TO TRANSFORM
YOUR TEAM’S MINDSET.....6

7 TRUTHS AND TIPS TO REDESIGN THE STUDENT
EXPERIENCE.....9

STUDENT JOURNEY MAPPING
101.....14

COMMUNICATE SEAMLESSLY WITH THE RIGHT SUPPORT
TOOLS.....16

REMEMBER, ALWAYS PUT STUDENTS FIRST.....18

CITATIONS & SOURCES.....19



INTRODUCTION

More than ever before, the prospective student market requires higher education institutions to change their mindset on how to approach student recruitment and retention. With all engagements moved to digital platforms, it's critical to understand the student journey from beginning to end. In the wake of COVID-19, schools will need to be agile, and think on their feet as they move into the new, digital reality that students no longer simply expect, but need. It's important to determine any potential roadblocks early on, and to have a plan ready to address them, whether these problems relate to financial aid, access to technology, or something else entirely.

This necessary paradigm shift is leading efforts to “redesign the student experience,” which involves using new ways of thinking to create a consistent, cohesive, and compelling journey for students throughout the entire student lifecycle—from their first touchpoint as a prospect through graduation. Implementing strategies that include hyper-personalization, flexibility, and design-thinking principles on campus will lead to success, while stagnation will guarantee an institution is left behind. Ultimately, redesigning the student experience requires a shift in staff mentality to one that challenges the status quo, prioritizes the student, and supports innovative thinking, strategies, and technologies.

CHANGING STUDENT DEMOGRAPHICS DEMAND NEW PERSPECTIVES

The push to redesign the student experience is a hot topic in higher education for a reason, especially in 2020 and beyond. Student demographics are undeniably changing, resulting in a seismic shift in student expectations about how they are recruited and retained. Committed students are rethinking their choices as the reality of the new COVID-19 reality sets in. These students are looking to stay closer to home, explore community college options, or take a gap year. Because of this, the ways in which institutions approach the student journey must meet this transformation to remain relevant and competitive, and perhaps most importantly, to make their students feel seen and understood in an increasingly uncertain world.

COVID-19 has changed the higher education industry as we know it.

As we enter the first school year amid the Coronavirus pandemic, nearly every student is an “at-risk” student. The rapidly increasing unemployment rate means that many students or their parents might suddenly be out of work and will need to consider financial aid, loans, and community college options, while others will consider gap years in order to stay close to home. Even if students are able to come to campus, the question remains: what will the fall bring? Because the situation is changing daily, it’s more important than ever to remove barriers wherever possible and improve the student experience, creating a strong top and middle of the funnel as you work to recruit new students in coming years.

The landscape for traditional high school graduates is changing and competition will continue to increase.

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

Non-traditional students are the new traditional.

Seventy-four percent of students share at least one of the characteristics of a “non-traditional student.” Non-traditional students are considered those over the age of 24 with one or more of the following characteristics:

they wait until after high school to enroll in post-secondary education, attend college part-time while working full-time, have dependents who are not their spouse or partner, are financially independent from their parents for purposes of financial aid, or have completed their high school degree through a certificate or GED program. This is the face of the “new traditional” student. Do you understand their motivations? Are you able to support their distinctive needs?

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

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

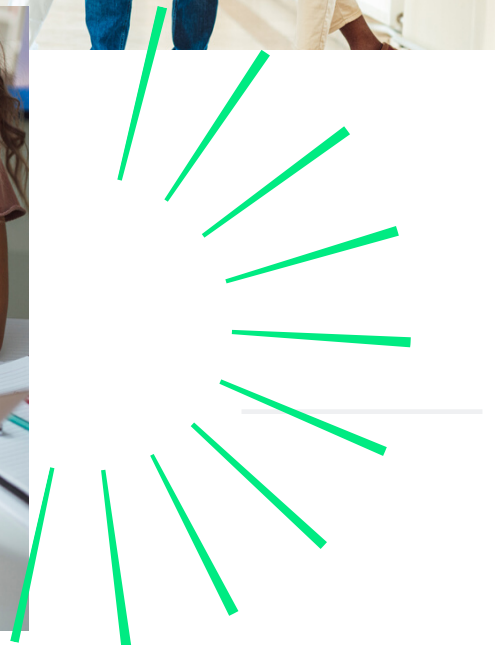
While the number of first-generation college-goers is increasing, many face financial, social, and academic barriers, struggle with retention, and require additional support. For instance, 20 percent of first generation college students do not consider English their first language and 75.3 percent anticipated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

Generation Z has greatly different expectations than Millennials.

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

When it comes to finances, Gen Z and Millennials hardly resemble one another. While Millennials were characterized by the “follow your dreams no matter what” mantra, Gen Z is focused on the financial consequences of their decisions. In fact, a study by TD Ameritrade on Gen Z revealed that 46 percent are worried about accruing student loan debt, yet, 60 percent of Gen Z believes that “a lot of money” is evidence of success.

Does your institution offer a competitive and desirable outcome for graduates when compared to tuition costs? And what's more, have you taken the new financial challenges into consideration? Gen Z is going to be graduating into a job market as bad as, or worse than, the Great Recession that faced Millennials in 2008. The ability to find a job and reach that monetary goal mentioned above is going to be more difficult than ever before, which means they'll be looking for value more than ever before.



DESIGN-THINKING PRACTICES TO TRANSFORM YOUR TEAM'S MINDSET

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

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

1. Empathize with your prospects.

Institutions must begin the design-thinking process by truly listening and engaging with their student audience to understand their unique needs and expectations — devoid of individual assumptions or biases. When institutions develop empathy and can feel the desires of their prospects, they come from a powerful place of strength to develop solutions that actually work. Use this time to develop thorough, human-centered profiles of your target prospects. Students today will need their unique situations and needs heard in order to feel secure in their college decision; empathy will give you a pathway.

2. Define your challenges.

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

3. Ideate on solutions.

This is the time for brainstorming and creativity within the team. Problems have been successfully identified based on empathetic engagement with prospects, and now you can uncover innovative ways to solve them. In this phase, there are no bad ideas! Generate as many ideas as possible and they will likely start to shift and change into others as the process unfolds. While there is no wrong way to generate ideas, it is highly encouraged to make them visual. While traditional white-boarding and sticky-note sessions may not be possible, share over zoom, or create virtual white boards through platforms like Google Slides.

When stuck, get creative. Stanford recommends techniques like: “breaking the law” (are there any constraints you can break through?); comparing the problem to other real-world examples; continuing to ask ‘how and why?;’ emulating ideas from other successful institutions; and inverting the problem to see if it sparks more ideas. From there, your team can narrow all of its ideas down to the most promising.

4. Prototype the best ideas.

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

5. Test, redefine, and deploy with prospects

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

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

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"THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE DOESN'T START WHEN STUDENTS SET FOOT ON YOUR CAMPUS FOR THE FIRST TIME, IT STARTS THE MINUTE THEY RECEIVE A COMMUNICATION FROM YOUR INSTITUTION. TOO OFTEN, WE FORGET THAT THE DIGITAL EXPERIENCE IS JUST AS IMPORTANT TO STUDENTS AS THEIR PHYSICAL EXPERIENCE."

”

Jay Murray

Associate Vice President for Enrollment Services
Western Connecticut State University

7 TRUTHS AND TIPS TO REDESIGN THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE

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



TRUTH #1: DATA AND ANALYTICS ARE AN INSTITUTION'S BEST FRIEND.

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

TRUTH #2: "MOBILE-FRIENDLY" IS A THING OF THE PAST. THINK MOBILE-FIRST.

Nearly 8 in 10 Millennials are logging into four or more digital platforms per day. Plus, 85 percent say that mobile devices are a central part of everyday life, and 91 percent of mobile users say access to content any way they want it is important to them. [2] This means that digital mobility, accessibility, and superior design matter.

Instead of simply meeting students where they are, the institutions that create their digital experience in anticipation of where students will be are at an absolute advantage. Being mobile-first, and not just mobile-friendly, will set your institution apart and create a truly seamless, cross-platform experience for students.



TRUTH #3: CENTRALIZED STUDENT INFORMATION ENABLES GREATER PERSONALIZATION.

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

Many schools will “customize” their outbound communication to prospects by inserting {{first name}} or {{major}} variables, and that’s the extent of it. Gather and track unique student attributes on a student’s record, with the help of a CRM, to break through the clutter with hyper-personalized outreach. From there, ensure student success through graduation with the ability to track and identify at-risk students and visualize data on an intuitive dashboard. This will allow your institution to maintain a proactive, rather than reactive, approach to retention from the moment a student enrolls.

TRUTH #4: SLOW RFIS DO MORE HARM THAN GOOD.

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



TRUTH #5: LIVE CHAT FEATURES WORK.

Oftentimes, if prospects don't find answers immediately, they move on. That's why the immediacy of live chat features is so successful. In fact, a Zendesk Benchmark report found that people who "choose live chat for customer service are satisfied a higher percentage of the time than those who call, email, or use social media channels."

Empower your counselors and advisors to get back to the business of connecting with students and solving complex problems by allowing a live chat feature to eliminate the repetitive, mundane questions received on a daily basis.

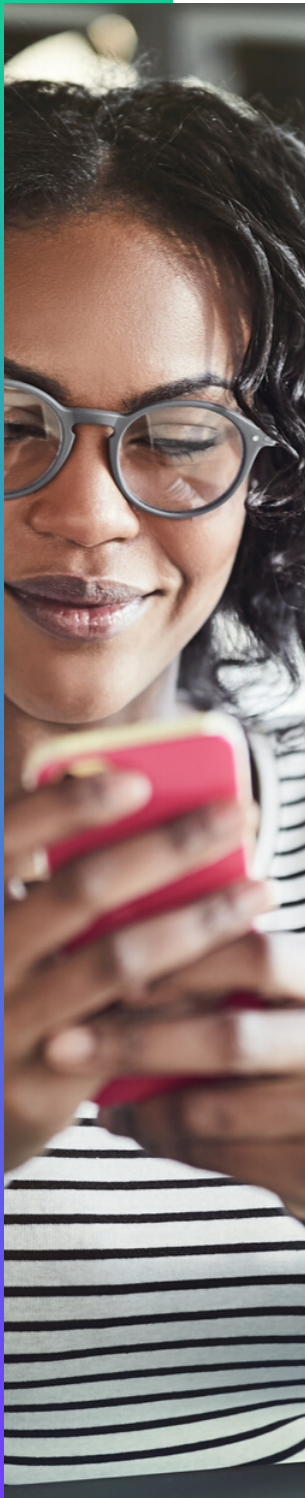
TRUTH #6: MOBILE APPS HELP CREATE AN ENGAGED, UNIFIED STUDENT BODY THAT STAYS.

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



TRUTH #7: STUDENTS WANT YOU TO TEXT THEM. REALLY.

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



STUDENT JOURNEY MAPPING 101

The first step in redesigning the student experience is understanding what your student experience is. One of the easiest, and most thorough ways to do this is through student journey mapping.

To successfully outline a student's journey through their education, start by gathering representatives from various departments across your campus: student billing, registration, student life, financial aid, academics, library services, etc. These departments tend to be individually responsible for their own communications to incoming students, and while this is well-intended, it can lead to students feeling overwhelmed with disjointed information from various segments of your institution.

As you start gathering representatives from all those campus departments, compile a master communication list: what information is each office sending out, and what does it feel like as a student to receive these communications?

Getting started:

Student journey mapping starts with building a set of questions about the student experience:

- What kinds of things do they do, and how often do they do them?
- What are their big questions? What values are shaping those questions?
- What is their primary goal?
- Who is influencing them in their personal lives?
- Who from the school are they in contact with? Departments, individuals?
- What technological systems do they interact with?

These questions then get applied in two directions – defining student types, and fleshing out detailed information about student types over time. Student types are groups of students who share similar answers to those questions, like “first generation students” or “students living in campus housing.” These types are not necessarily all mutually exclusive, and one individual student may match with several different student types. Each type is designed to capture a specific set of student experiences. As student services professionals, you may be able to start listing the most common student types present on your campus just off the top of your head – that’s a great place to start!

Assessing Engagement with Different Student Types

The next piece of the student journey mapping framework involves focusing on one particular student type, and filling in answers to the major questions for different time periods in the student lifecycle. For our purposes, we have broken down the time periods as follows:

- Pre-Application
- Application
- Admitted, Not Yet Enrolled
- Currently Enrolled
- Graduate

It helps to create a matrix, with the major questions along one axis and the time periods on the other, allowing you to fill in the narrative for a particular student type in a grid.

[**DOWNLOAD YOUR TEMPLATE**](#)

Examining the student journey for a particular student type over their entire relationship with the school paints a vivid picture of the student's educational path. It's easy to see how each time period influences the next, and what threads are carried through the journey as a whole.

While this big picture is certainly helpful, the student journey framework can also be used to examine specific areas. If your focus is on one particular time period, like mine was when I was examining our incoming student on-boarding process, you can zoom in and get more granular. This framework can highlight problem areas, gaps in service, or particular needs in ways that wouldn't be as visible otherwise. As much as developing a campus-wide enrollment initiative or retention initiative would be helpful, small changes can still have a big impact.

By applying the lens of student journeys to student services, we're prioritizing the holistic student experience. As silos of knowledge get broken down, we get better at serving our students. When my previous colleagues and I committed to prioritize our incoming students' experience as a whole, we were far more successful at serving students in our various departmental capacities. It's our hope that this student journey framework aids you in your efforts to serve students as well.

COMMUNICATE SEAMLESSLY WITH THE RIGHT SUPPORT TOOLS

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

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

- 97% of undergrads own a smartphone
- 47% rate smartphones as “very or extremely important” to academic success
- 8 in 10 students visit a college website from their mobile device
- 76% of them indicate the experience as “ok” or “challenging” [6]
- 76% of students completed some portion of their admissions application on a mobile device [7]
- 13% of students actually completed the application on their mobile device [8]

TAKEAWAY: You’ve heard that you should be meeting your prospective students where they are. And right now, they’re at home, on their phones. In fact, students are moving further away from desktops and turning to mobile for all of their internet-based needs. Did you know that only 29 percent of undergrads own a desktop? With states opening slowly, and the future increasingly uncertain, students have had more time than ever to scroll through their phones. It’s more imperative than ever that your website, and more importantly your application, can be accessed easily from a mobile device. This takes more than simply scaling your website and application to fit smaller screens. Speed, accessibility, and design matter — the student experience should never feel disjointed or difficult to navigate. The application process, from start to finish, should be able to be done by phone; anything less creates an unnecessary barrier for potential students.

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

- Smartphone users go online with their mobile devices an average of 150 times a day, and with the recent stay at home orders, are more active than ever
- Smartphone sessions are 1.5 times shorter than other devices
- Delays in being able to access mobile content causes users' heart rates to rise an average of 38%

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

Prioritize accessible mobile emails and time them strategically.

- Email is the most popular activity on smartphones among users ages 18-44
- Over 50% of smartphone users grab their smartphone immediately after waking up
- Mobile email opens have grown by 180% in the last three years
- Email marketing has an ROI of 4,300%

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

REMEMBER, ALWAYS PUT STUDENTS FIRST

Ultimately, redesigning the student experience means prioritizing students by employing a top-down approach to recruitment and keeping the end in mind. With everything moving to digital platforms, at least for the foreseeable future, simply adopting new technologies and implementing innovative tactics will not cut it. Students need to feel supported and heard on campus more than ever, and successfully redesigning the student experience requires institutions to adopt a strategic paradigm shift in addition to upgrading technology.

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



CITATIONS AND SOURCES

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ABOUT US



TargetX is reimagining the student experience with CRM solutions that span the student lifecycle. Built on the Salesforce platform – the worldwide leader in customer relationship management – TargetX offers comprehensive solutions for recruitment, admissions, and student success. TargetX helps over 350 higher ed institutions meet and exceed their enrollment and retention goals and, with world-class implementation and support teams, is a true partner for success. With its 20+ years of innovative technology and higher education expertise, TargetX is the most trusted CRM provider in higher education. To learn more, visit targetx.com.