



Why the Student Experience Matters (and What You Can Do About It)



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It's time to embrace the student experience as a crucial data set – and experience management as a core part of your institutional tech stack.

A FEW YEARS AGO, IN A SURVEY OF NEARLY 30,000 people, Gallup and Purdue University identified the six college experiences that graduates considered most important for finding success and happiness. They included items such as, “my professors cared about me as a person” and “I was extremely active in extracurricular activities and organizations.” The wake-up call for higher ed: *Just 3% of respondents* strongly agreed that they had actually had all six experiences.

That finding exposes a huge gap. While colleges and universities rightly put a laser focus on student success as their *raison d'être*, there's an outsize driver of that about which they must get a whole lot smarter: the *student experience*.

Commonly, tracking the student experience is done in siloed departments as a series of ad-hoc, largely disconnected *projects*; the exit survey done after an Admit weekend, end-of-semester course and instructor feedback, and the like.

Programs, not Projects

Here's what's needed instead: a *programmatic* approach, one that can systematically measure – and improve upon – the whole student journey, soup-to-nuts, campus- and departmental-wide. From admit to alum. The purpose? To identify those key moments in the journey that disproportionately matter most to each individual student and also to your larger institution: applicant volume, yield, first- to second-year retention, graduation, transfer rate, job placement, graduation, donations, belonging, engagement, and brand perception.

If a project is served by a point product, a *program needs a platform*. And I consider a platform to manage the student experience to be as vital to the higher ed technology stack as the SIS, the LMS, and the CRM. *This* is the missing link that will drive the metrics you care most

about. Getting rigorous *at a student-specific level* about the experiences each is having is the only way to take actions to make them better – at both a campus level and at an individual level.

While the three other systems provide some insight into the student experience via the operational data they generate, they mostly offer *lagging indicators*. They can tell you that someone hasn't been in class for three consecutive sessions, isn't completing assignments, or is in danger of being put on academic probation. But they won't tell you how the student is feeling. If they're actually *engaged* in teaching and learning. If your school doesn't understand why a student is acting a certain way, it's not addressing the root problem.

Experience data, by contrast, is a *leading indicator*. You can't prevent someone from dropping out if you don't understand the experiences they've been having that got them to that point. That requires a comprehensive and real-time composite of student satisfaction from a number of sources – quick check-ins; listening in on social channels; pulling in some of that operational data; deeper-dive instruments at key moments; and then tapping artificial intelligence to recognize hidden patterns and get predictive.

That is the promise of an experience management platform. It's not specific to any given office. It helps leaders elevate student voice and listen to it at scale, to understand what they're most concerned about, and then take appropriate action.

Fortunately, you already have a running start toward implementing a student experience program.

Super Student-Focused

Higher ed institutions have embraced technology for well-being, contact tracing, symptom checkers, and vaccine status

management. In many cases, they've turned to **Qualtrics** tools and services – which they're already deeply familiar with on the academic research side – for wrangling that data. There were hundreds of thousands of new instruments being created on Qualtrics by schools during this time.

Colleges and universities should keep the momentum going by extending those regular touchpoints to make them more thorough, uncovering insights about student experience in and out of the classroom – about mental health, about how the various learning modalities are going, about instructor feedback, about career and advisor support, about participation in campus life and extracurriculars, and about so many of the other areas that make college memorable and worth attending.

When you create an instrument with the **Qualtrics XM** platform, you can easily distribute it via every channel, using student-specific links to get information that's relevant to individuals, whose unique journey you can then better manage.

Plus, by approaching experience management as a platform versus a project, you can apply it not just to the student experience, but also to faculty and staff, to also improve employee engagement in limitless ways.

XM: The Crucial Data Set!

Higher ed institutions must improve at putting experience programs in place to ensure student success. That entails understanding how people are feeling; gathering sentiment data en masse; recognizing that they're more than just a row in a gradebook, or a graduation or job placement metric. They are individuals having daily experiences in and out of the classroom that are highly variable and that will shape their outcomes in life.

And I hasten to add that understanding these experiences is even more critical where the gaps are the biggest, in addressing the needs of students of color, low-income, and those who are first-generation or non-traditional.

Let's close these gaps by embracing student experience as a crucial data set. And by embracing an experience management platform as a newly vital piece of your institution's tech stack.

***Omar Garriott** is the Global Industry Leader for education at Qualtrics. Omar has spent his career helping lead education verticals within Adobe, Apple, LinkedIn and Salesforce. In his current role, he helps schools revolutionize the academic experience and boost engagement with students and faculty.*

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