

A “Student-Ready” College

What does it mean for a college to be “student-ready”?

A student-ready college is a relatively new term in higher education. It is meant to describe an institution that focuses on creating an educational environment that assists students with their academic preparation and helps remove barriers to their success. This sort of higher-education institution welcomes diverse and nontraditional-age students and seeks to provide individualized academic support, often through data mining and technological assistance. Learning is designed to occur throughout the student experience, to help students prepare for life and work after graduation. These values of supporting students are reflected throughout the culture of the institution, from executive leadership to faculty and support staff.

The phrase “student-ready college” surfaced more than a decade ago, and one of the earliest references was a 2008 report, [College-Ready Students, Student-Ready Colleges: An Agenda for Improving Degree Completion in Postsecondary Education](#), which was published by the

Center for American Progress. Since then, it has been used more frequently in higher-ed conversations and literature.

Why is it important for a college to be ready for students?

In past decades, higher-education institutions expected students to arrive “college-ready” and prepared for the academic coursework. At many institutions, those students who weren’t were quickly “weeded out” during their first year or two of college. However, in recent years, colleges and universities have faced increasing external pressure to educate a more varied group of students, improve graduation rates, and demonstrate the value of the coursework and degrees their institutions provide.

About 40 percent of students who start college fail to graduate with a bachelor’s degree within six years, according to federal data. As tuitions have continued to rise, students and sometimes their parents have questioned the value of the education provided by

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colleges. In a 2015 national survey by Gallup-Purdue, only half of alumni who graduated from 2006 to 2015 said they “strongly agree” that their education was worth the cost. Meanwhile, many colleges have struggled to meet their student enrollment and retention goals and have faced increased competition from peer institutions as well as new educational providers.

To help advance student success, some colleges have taken steps to reconfigure and more systematically personalize the education they provide.

The academic needs and educational paths of students also have shifted in recent years. About 40 percent of college students are now older than traditional age, according to federal education data. Many students now take nonlinear paths through higher education and juggle work and family obligations with their academic coursework. More than a third will transfer at least once during their college years, and some will drop out and then return in later years, according to the National Student Clearinghouse. Parents, students, and lawmakers also in recent years have increased pressure for higher-education institutions to better prepare students for the world of work and help them navigate their careers.

What are colleges doing to be more student-ready?

In response to these external pressures and changing student needs, a growing number of higher-education institutions have begun to think of students as customers and have examined strategies to improve the experience the institution provides throughout the student lifecycle. To help advance student success, some colleges have taken steps to reconfigure and more systematically personalize the education they provide.

Several online universities, including Southern New Hampshire University and Colorado State University Global Campus, have taken a holistic approach to the student lifecycle in the past decade. They use technology to gather information about students, coordinate with advisers, provide feedback metrics to academic and students services staff, and offer unified and personally tailored communication with students at key points. They and a growing number of brick-and-mortar institutions have begun using customer-relationship management software to design how they engage and communicate with students.

Some higher-education institutions, including Stanford University and Lake Forest College, also have placed more focus on the career coaching they provide to students, often beginning in the freshman year. The 2016 Gallup-Purdue Index report found that graduates who had a high-quality experience with career services were far more likely to believe their university education prepared them well for life outside college and was worth the cost. At institutions such as Colorado State’s Global Campus, the in-person career coaching is complemented with targeted online information through automated software that generates information tailored to students’ interests, including career tips and local university and business events related to their field of study.

How does being student-ready affect the curriculum?

Higher-education institutions that have comprehensively worked to improve student success in recent years often have shifted the focus of their curriculum to educate students to demonstrate competencies. That measurement often occurs through data analysis, at both traditional and online institutions. At Southern New Hampshire University, for example, students progress through their education at their own pace as they demonstrate mastery of skills and content, and the university then measures that through direct assessment, rather than seat time or credit hours.

Endeavors such as the Value Institute also have started in recent years to assist traditional colleges and universities with mining data to assess and improve student learning. The institute is a partnership between the Association of American Colleges and Universities and Indiana University's Center for Postsecondary Research. Its aim is to provide faculty and institution leaders with data to help them evaluate and improve student achievement, measured against a set of outcomes that are important for all disciplines.

How does being student-ready affect student services?

When institutions focus on student success and use technology and software to apply student data to improve the individual customer experience, student services become much more personalized and responsive. The organizational culture at these institutions expects each department to bring up issues that need improvement and to work together to find solutions to improve student success.

Data analysis can lead to adjustments in student services, extra faculty training, and additions or deletions in course offerings. At Colorado State's Global Campus, for example, marketing plays an important role in communicating with students and others that issues have been addressed. Monitoring

individual student data also helps academic advisers know when they should provide in-person assistance and coaching.

How will the concept of being student-ready evolve?

Some higher-education leaders believe that more brick-and-mortar institutions in the years ahead will take greater interest in using technology and data mining to provide a holistic approach to serving students and building relationships with them, from the time potential students first consider enrolling to the communications they receive as alumni. The technology will be used to amplify human interactions in order to advance student success.

Other possible developments include new ways of helping students demonstrate the competencies they have acquired through their education to employers, through means such as blockchain credentialing. Artificial intelligence and machine learning also may play a role in helping improve the student experience in the future. Southern New Hampshire University, for example, is working to develop artificial intelligence to do initial assessments of student projects, with the aim of helping faculty members finish the assessment more quickly and have more time to interact directly with students to help them learn.

**“A ‘Student-Ready’ College” was produced by Chronicle Intelligence.
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