

PERSPECTIVES

Student Success

Kathe Pelletier, with Tina Balsler, Jeff Grann, Maggie Jesse, Kal Srinivas, and Karen Vignare

Student success has occupied a prominent spot in the Top 10 IT Issues for the past few years. Whereas this year's results are no different, the issues related to student success have become more nuanced. In 2020 "student success" as a monolithic category has been deconstructed into three potentially more meaningful issues: *Student-Centric Higher Education* (#5), *Student Retention and Completion* (#6), and *Holistic Student Success* (coming in at #11, just missing the Top 10 list).

Five community members shared their reactions to the 2020 Top 10 IT Issues in the context of their work in student success.



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The community members were divided about the placement of student success issues in the Top 10 list this year. Some saw the change from the 2019 list—which had *Student Success* at #2 and *Student-Centered Institution* at #4—as a sign that higher education might be deprioritizing student success as a whole.

Srinivas:

Technology is revolutionizing higher education and should start and end with our concern for student success within and beyond our campuses. Implementation of learning analytics initiatives supports *Student Retention and Completion*, which can be powered by artificial intelligence (AI) to drive these holistic systems to scale. To lose a focus on student success as a top priority could threaten *Sustainable Funding* (#3) and the

importance of strategic *Digital Integrations* (#4). The top two issues—*Information Security Strategy* and *Privacy*—are indeed important but are derived from a utility positioning and not a strategic positioning. Don't get us wrong: risk management and data stewardship are important, though increasingly challenging due to the complexities of our technological society.

Balsler:

I'm not surprised that *Student-Centric Higher Education* and *Student Retention and Completion* are on the list for the first time, but in my opinion they should be #1 and #2. Leading with a student services ecosystem model will change the way in which we operate our daily work, programming, funding, IT infrastructure, and support for students to be "world ready." It's not about just sustaining the IT enterprise but, rather, is now about being more inclusive of the whole student experience.

Jesse:

Student Success was called out as the second-highest priority in 2019, which provided high visibility of its importance. Not seeing those specific words highlighted on the 2020 list was a bit shocking—at first glance. However, this year's list includes three very

specific student concerns: *Student-Centric Higher Education*; *Student Retention and Completion*; and *Higher Education Affordability* (#8). While all three of these require institutional resources and focus on student success, they all feel more like the means to that end and not necessarily as "the" issue.

At the same time, several members view the student success issues and the more purely technical issues in the Top 10 list as an ecosystem with parts that must work in sync to ultimately support students and learning, particularly in relation to strategic data collection, management, and application.

Balsler:

With the increase of student success management tools and data that is now captured, institutions have a great opportunity and challenge to identify their campus-wide data ecosystem and to leverage the data to scale services like never before. As a result of understanding such an ecosystem, those of us in higher education can be most effective by understanding gap areas as a way to improve the student experience at all stages. We need to know more about what our students want and how they want us to reach them. As our institutions continue to scale student success efforts and incorporate new technologies, we are faced with a moving target in understanding and communicating with our Generation Z students, especially when we discuss AI student services. In addition, we have an opportunity to harness data like never before and move into data-rich and data-informed organizations.

Grann:

Given this urgency, it's frustrating that *Digital Integrations* is still a Top 10 IT Issue in higher education. Solutions are in hand. Standards are available. Technology has been developed. The institutional incentives are aligned. Multiple industries, including travel and financial services, have successfully solved these problems. Yet, *Digital Integrations* is still a significant issue, one that I sometimes hear expressed as exasperation over data access and business models that lock customers into using specific products. This issue isn't just talk. Digital integration problems take real resources (both time and money) away from addressing other issues and reduce the capacity of IT leaders to support much-needed innovations.

Solving the *Digital Integrations* issue could also connect higher education with other sectors via multiple emerging IT issues, such as career pathways, workplace-based learning, performance-based assessments, comprehensive learner records, curricular feedback loops, and ROI-based quality assurance mechanisms. Competencies encoded as digital data via open standards have tremendous potential to promote these cross-sector connections. Major employers and government agencies are increasingly defining data strategies and are motivated to partner with education providers. There has never been a better time for educational technologists to make substantive contributions in areas of national importance.

Srinivas:

For the IT organization to truly become a strategic partner in higher education, its vision and mission should include student success and should support strategic objectives that work across divisions in higher education. These partnerships will make good institutions become great, thereby moving the IT organization beyond just support and utility. These innovations will be disruptive in nature but will help schools and colleges scale and sustain holistic student success.

Some members focused on the student learning aspect of student success and urged for action and investment even amid emerging technologies.

Vignare:

Seeing student success issues move from #2 and #4 in 2019 to #5 and #6 in 2020 was slightly disappointing. Our IT colleagues are incredibly important to student success in designing and supporting the work through infrastructure and improved processes. I think many of us in higher education are still overly fascinated with how AI may disrupt teaching and learning in the distant future and are not focusing on the improved design and tools we can put into place now. By leveraging some current-state tools (e.g., adaptive courseware) and focusing on supporting faculty, we can improve student success in many general education courses. We don't have to wait until everyone understands AI and the user experience. We need to leverage what we know and think about priorities, such as how students entering academic courses get through administrative processes more easily and also how we can improve their learning experience.

Jesse:

To state the obvious, it's not surprising that *Information Security Strategy* topped the list again. Information security is consistently at the top of the list for discussion and funding at my institution. Yet though it's not a surprise, I do look forward to the day when we can put that issue further down the list and focus more on student success concerns.

I would particularly like to see greater focus on supporting the delivery of instruction and improvements in learning delivery. What happens in the teaching environment is core to why our institutions exist. Support for improved teaching, increased engagement, and the use of new technology and data opportunities for learning analytics and innovative teaching and learning applications of AI are exciting developments that deserve the investment of more resources.

Finally, change management was viewed as a missing priority.

Balser:

We must recognize that there is a huge opportunity to confront the barriers ahead and that many change management conversations still need to take place before we can truly move the needle on student retention and completion goals.

Srinivas:

A critical missing issue is change management. Information technology becomes diluted and marginally effective if change management is not intricately woven into the fabric of our higher education institutions, where culture always trumps strategy.

Ultimately, after carefully considering the EDUCAUSE 2020 Top 10 IT Issues, these members of the student success community call for the following from higher education IT professionals:

- Forming partnerships across campus to keep the student experience in mind
- Paying attention to change management and culture
- Investing in a strategic data ecosystem that can reveal insights about institutional performance and students' progress as a way to drive future action
- Not losing sight of the critical goal of student success

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