

A hand holding a glowing fist with lightning bolts. The hand is clenched into a fist, and a bright, glowing light emanates from the center of the fist, radiating outwards. From the top left, a blue lightning bolt strikes down towards the fist. From the bottom right, a red lightning bolt strikes upwards towards the fist. The background is black.

CONTRIBUTED ARTICLE

# THE **INCREASING** **POWER** OF THE **STUDENT** **CONSUMER**

Three Critical Steps to Meet  
the Demands and Support the  
Success of Today's Student

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**P**rior to joining the world of education technology in higher education, I spent a few years at the American Productivity and Quality Center. We conducted benchmarking studies on all business processes within education, including projects on student recruitment, online learning and assessing learning outcomes. I'll never forget the project on assessing learning outcomes where an entire day was spent trying to define the customer. Needless to say, the consortium was made up of 30 traditional, nonprofit institutions.

After countless meetings like that, I found it refreshing to work with for-profit colleges and universities. These institutions clearly know that the customer is the student and are constantly innovating to improve the customer/student experience.

With this assumption, the key question becomes, "How do we improve the student experience?" As one career college CEO said, "Anything we do to improve the customer experience tends to drop directly to our bottom line." The rationale was that improving the experience on the front end drives more enrollments and improves overall retention during their academic career.

So, if everyone is operating with this mindset, how come we aren't seeing every for-profit college making significant strides in bettering the student experience?

My hypothesis is this: In order to better improve the experience for any customer, schools need to readily be able to access all data and information about that student. While that sounds simple, it rarely happens in today's education market because the data resides in so many places. Disparate systems collect different pieces of information about your customer throughout their experience with your institution, but rarely is that data and information easily accessible. And, too many times if it is accessible, it's difficult to get to it in a timely manner.

### **Knowing Your Customer**

As we all think about the type of customers that are attracted to for-profit colleges, research indicates that these students are typically nontraditional learners. They like the flexibility that comes with career education. The challenge is that each of your competitors knows this as well, and is bombarding them with information about their programs. In order to really serve these students during the admissions process, each of you needs to dig deeper to understand your successful customer profile.

### **How do you start to build the profile of a successful student at your school?**

The challenge with creating a clear picture of your customer is rarely a lack of data, but more often how to wade through the abundance of data you have collected over the years. Most schools have a minimum of five systems that house various data elements about a particular student. Chances are within those systems, there are at least two that make it difficult to access the information.

The good news for career college executives is that advances in technology are making it easier to collect all the student lifecycle data in a central repository and paint a complete picture of a student. If you can pull information from the time your institution touches someone as a prospect through their application, enrollment, financial aid packaging, academic career and then their job placement, you can start to get a better understanding of what makes your customers successful at your school. In a market that has been stagnant for quite some time, there is a major need to simplify student management processes. Schools shouldn't have to adopt numerous disparate product suites to achieve their goals – this only leads to costly and time consuming integrations, and often significant IT infrastructure requirements.

### **Leveraging the Information**

So, how can career colleges best leverage this information to achieve that sought after student experience?

#### **Step One: Report on student activity from prospect to placement in order to support decisions**

- By enabling career colleges to easily create reports on their own, they can analyze the data that is most important to their particular college, for example, student outcomes. This allows them to make decisions faster and adapt to an information era more efficiently.

#### **Step Two: Monitor student inflection points**

- By analyzing student communications with faculty and the school, career colleges can better gauge learning abilities and styles to determine exactly when, where and how each student can be most successful.

#### **Step Three: Deliver education where and when students want it**

- By tracking student enrollments and preferences, career colleges can adapt offerings and formats, and increase or decrease programs to better meet demand.

There is tremendous opportunity for career colleges to gain deeper insight into a student's learning abilities,

preferences and outcomes, so the college can best meet a particular student's needs and the student can maximize the education experience. Career colleges should have access to the tools and information that can help them derive a complete picture of each unique student in order to attract and retain the student through successful program completion.

### **At the end of the day, what is the “purpose” of all of this?**

The student consumer shift should be driving career colleges to take action – to deliver education when and where students want it, to monitor student inflection points, and to report on student information from prospect to placement.

To quote Stephen Joel Trachtenberg, President Emeritus and Professor of Public Services at George Washington University, in the Jan. 3, 2010 edition of *The New York Times* (“Are They Students? Or Customers?”), “They [students] are investing time and money with a purpose in mind. The school that does not serve that purpose will not survive.”

While the general reference in the article was to traditional MBA students, it's not a stretch of the imagination at all to draw the parallels among the career college student consumer.

Schools that leverage information to make decisions and deliver a unique learning experience can provide the highest quality service at a value – “the purpose.”

It's these schools that will be able to recruit the types of students who will be most successful in their program, quickly launch new programs, and tailor offerings and delivery modes. These schools will be more competitive, see increased enrollments, and ultimately, graduate more students. ■



Justin McMorrow has spent his career working with institutions to build and grow successful programs. He is currently Senior Vice President and Co-Founder of TopSchool, Inc., which provides a robust Student Lifecycle Management (SLM) system that enables student-centric institutions to access, manage and report on student information from prospect to placement. Justin can be reached at [justinm@topschoolinc.com](mailto:justinm@topschoolinc.com).