EAB

Student Customer Service Perceptions Among Higher Ed Practitioners

Insights from EAB's 2023 Survey of Higher Education Leaders and Staff

Insights from Our Customer Service Survey

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> **What views did higher education practitioners have about student customer service?**
>
> Look for teal boxes throughout this report to see how our survey respondents answered our questions in their own words.

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Why Customer Service Matters for Student Engagement

SECTION

1

Why Customer Service Matters

And What We Mean by "Student Customer Service"

The distinction between "student" and "customer" is blurring as student and family expectations change and educational institutions redefine and communicate their value with evolving objectives.

> "While I understand the customer service aspect of our services, I still believe our services are not the same from the customer service in commercial industries....**We should provide transformational experiences, not transactional.** Transformational interactions require time, empathy, commitment, knowledge...."
>
> — *Survey Respondent*

It's crucial to recognize that at the core of caring for students and nurturing their sense of belonging lies the imperative to offer an experience that prioritizes their needs. When students encounter unnecessary friction or challenges in their college experience, it can lead to a fundamental question: *Does this institution really care about me?* Whether or not your institution explicitly views students as "customers," applying customer service principles to your processes can significantly enhance student engagement and satisfaction.

With the industry so dramatically altered after the last four years, **EAB wanted to better understand how student "customer" service experiences have changed**. To expand our knowledge, and to drive our future research, we surveyed 95 student success practitioners at four-year institutions (see page 25 for more details on who completed our survey).

> ⚠️ We recognize that viewing students as customers can be contentious, so it's important to clarify **what we mean by "student customer service"** before delving into the results.

Student Customer Service **Is**		Student Customer Service **Is Not**
Helping students solve problems	✔	✖ A blanket endorsement of **"the student is always right"**
Guiding students in the **use of institutional resources**	✔	✖ **A one-sided approach**; it involves collaboration and understanding
Providing answers to students' questions	✔	✖ **An avoidance of challenges**, but working together to find solutions

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Customer Service Should Be an Institutional Focus

## Growing Consensus on the Need for Better Customer Service

Practitioners overwhelmingly acknowledged an increase in students' customer service expectations since before the pandemic, with 84% of practitioners reporting they have observed higher expectations.

The evolution of customer service models in sectors such as retail and technology have **raised the bar for experiences**. Students now anticipate that level of service across industries, including higher education.

Colleges and universities must recognize and address this need for a more responsive and efficient educational experience.

Do you think students' customer service expectations have increased since before the pandemic?
n=88

I'm not sure
9%

No

7%

84%
Yes
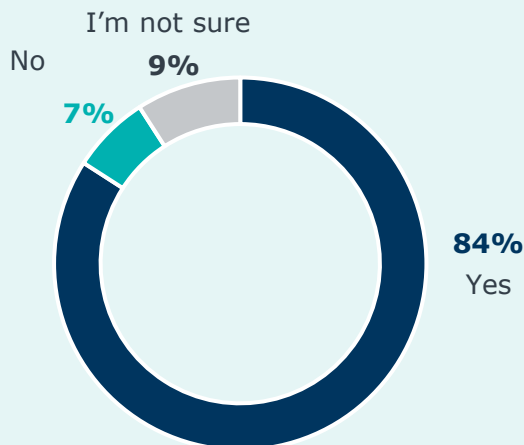
Customers' expectations shape the current landscape of the consumer market:

76%
expect immediate engagement

61%
would switch to a competitor after only one negative customer service experience

93%
are willing to spend more on companies that don't make them repeat themselves

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The Price of Poor Customer Service

Practitioners overwhelmingly acknowledged the **critical importance of customer service for student retention**. When we asked how important customer service is to retention efforts, a resounding 88% of practitioners said it is very important, with another 11% indicating it is somewhat important.

Poor student customer service is costing institutions more in dropout rates, with an outsized negative impact on underrepresented minority student groups.

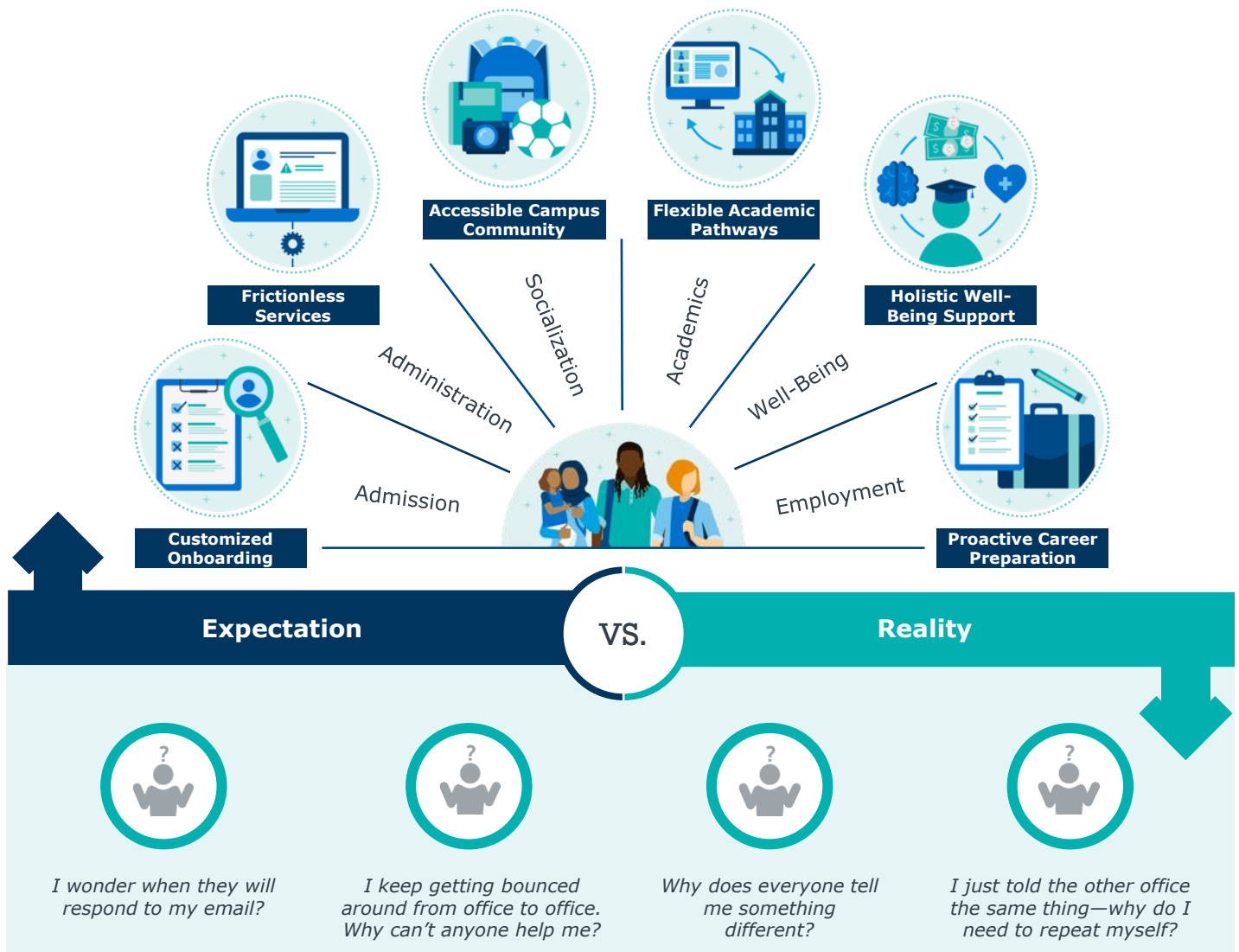|			
Many are first-generation college students **unfamiliar with navigating complex university bureaucracies**	These student groups may feel **less comfortable advocating for themselves** when facing unresponsive or untrained staff	Lack of comprehensive training can **allow unconscious biases to alienate minority students** seeking help	Struggling to access academic, financial aid, and wellness resources **exacerbates existing socioeconomic challenges**

Meeting Rising Student Expectations

Seamless Services and Personalization: The New Student Experience Standard

The experience standard is now established by consumer industries, where individuals are accustomed to tailored content suggestions and seamless, omnichannel customer service interactions. Throughout the student journey, both within and beyond the classroom, the modern experience is characterized by personalization and technology integration.

However, challenges may arise when your students face obstacles in administrative tasks or encounter difficulties accessing essential support services. These hurdles can lead to dissatisfaction and prompt students to question what they're getting from their college experience. While customer service gaps are not the only factors influencing student retention, they play a **crucial role in shaping the overall perception of your institution**.

The modern student seeks personalized, tech-enabled experiences across their educational journey

Frictionless Services

Accessible Campus Community

Flexible Academic Pathways

Holistic Well-Being Support

Socialization

Academics

Administration

Well-Being

Admission

Employment

Customized Onboarding

Proactive Career Preparation

Expectation VS. **Reality**

I wonder when they will respond to my email?

I keep getting bounced around from office to office. Why can't anyone help me?

Why does everyone tell me something different?

I just told the other office the same thing—why do I need to repeat myself?

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What Our Survey Revealed About Service Gaps

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Administrative Processes Anything but Frictionless

Disconnection Disrupts the Student Experience and Contributes to Attrition

Frictionless service refers to creating user-friendly and digital-first processes that minimize the burden of administrative tasks and refocus student attention on the educational experience. By helping students maintain momentum through streamlined processes, colleges and universities can increase the likelihood that students will persist and have a positive experience.

Our research shows that difficulty accessing staff and resources—reiterating their concerns multiple times or encountering roadblocks such as out-of-date information—can be disruptive to the student experience. **Over time, the accumulation of what might seem like small inconveniences erodes the trust a student has in the institution.**

Surveyed Staff Perspectives: How Service Gaps Impact Students

Missed Connections

81%

think current students have **difficulty connecting with the right people or resources** at least some of the time

Retention Threats

38%

think difficulty connecting to staff or tools **contributes to students leaving the institution**

The "Runaround"

44%

think students needing to **repeat their stories multiple times** hurts retention

Which of these friction points contribute to current students leaving your institution?

n=88; respondents could choose multiple options
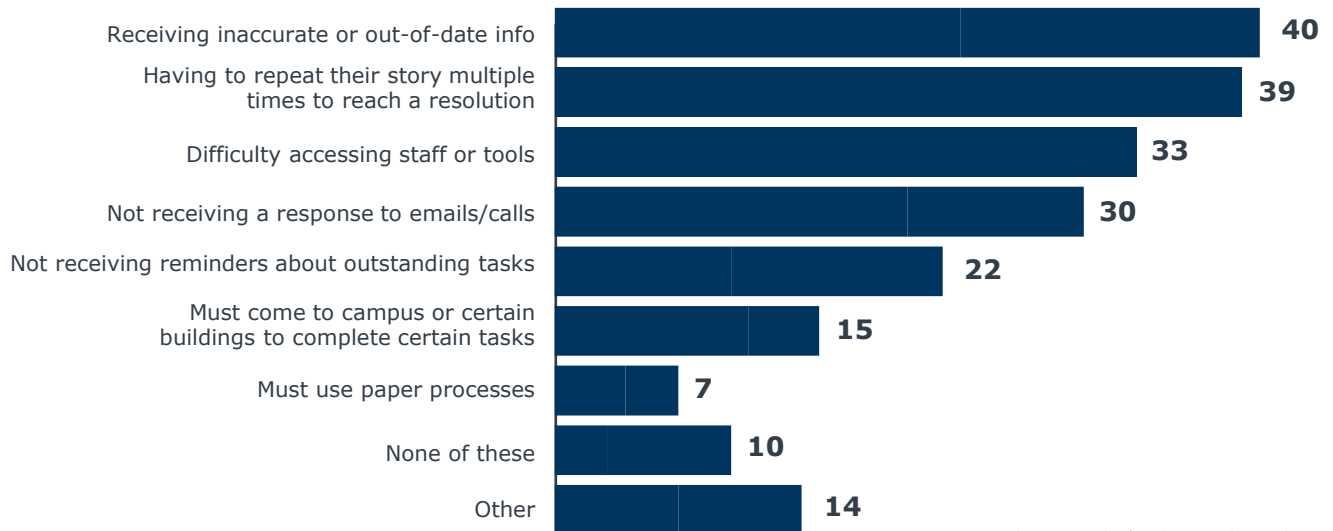
Friction point	Count
Receiving inaccurate or out-of-date info	40
Having to repeat their story multiple times to reach a resolution	39
Difficulty accessing staff or tools	33
Not receiving a response to emails/calls	30
Not receiving reminders about outstanding tasks	22
Must come to campus or certain buildings to complete certain tasks	15
Must use paper processes	7
None of these	10
Other	14

Source: EAB Student Customer Service Survey, September 2023; EAB interviews and analysis.

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Lapses Lead to Confusion, Delays

Students Often Face the Consequences of Lapses in Customer Service

Over half of the survey practitioners responded that their students are facing several consequences due to lapses in customer service. These challenges not only hinder the overall learning experience but also **contribute significantly to a sense of frustration and disconnection among students**.

Lapses in customer service create barriers that impede students from accessing support and resources crucial for their academic success. Addressing these concerns is pivotal for fostering a more inclusive, supportive, and streamlined educational environment, ultimately enhancing the overall quality of the student experience.

The Unintended Consequences of Customer Service Lapses

Decreases Efficiency

56% think students are **overwhelmed by the number of resources available in different places**

When students struggle to access support and resources, they may start to disengage. Feeling disconnected from the institution impacts their sense of belonging and commitment to their academic journey.

Increases Potential Disengagement

52% said **students don't know where to go to get help**

Students may view the lack of streamlined processes and support as a reflection of the institution's commitment to their success.

Reduces Academic Progress

54% indicated that lapses in customer service **limit course availability**

50% think that students are **facing delays in being able to register for classes**

Limited course availability and registration delays limit choices for students, hindering academic progress, potentially extending graduation time, affecting financial aid, and influencing student retention.

What did practitioners have to say?

Open-ended responses to the question "What are the impacts of lapses in customer service at your institution?"

"Students not enrolled in the appropriate classes due to confusion"

"Too much information and no direction"

Inconsistent Training for the Most Impactful Roles

Failing to provide adequate training to faculty and staff on how to support students during times of need can have **detrimental consequences for the student experience and retention rates**. Untrained staff struggle to effectively address students' challenges, risking increased attrition as students feel unsupported and disengaged.

Which of the following trainings does your institution offer to help faculty and staff create welcoming, supportive, inclusive, and strengths-/asset-based interactions with students?

n=68; respondents could choose multiple options

Training	Count
Confronting unconscious bias	42
Accessibility	30
Active listening	18
Asset-based language and communication	16
None	16
Other (Write-in)	6 "Resilience training"

What did practitioners have to say?
Open-ended responses to the question above

"These trainings are often optional or only offered to certain groups"

"Our faculty won't abide this training"

Twenty-four percent of respondents reported there was no training within their institutions aimed at equipping faculty and staff to establish meaningful connections with students. To truly foster holistic student success, it's imperative to prioritize the training of faculty and staff. Robust training programs enable staff to engage in constructive, student-focused interactions, ensuring all students feel supported in navigating institutional processes while upholding policy standards.

Faculty and staff interactions **make a big impact**

81%

agree interactions with faculty and staff have a **big impact on students' feelings of belonging**

Yet, staff **aren't consistently trained** *to be supportive*

65%

of respondents said their institution **does not offer customer service training** to student-facing staff and faculty

Source: EAB Student Customer Service Survey, September 2023; EAB interviews and analysis.

Students Struggle to Connect in Times of Stress

Facing Additional Difficulties During Times of Distress Can Erode Students' Trust

A substantial portion of respondents noted that their students have difficulty connecting with the necessary support or resources during periods of stress or mental health challenges. This is especially concerning given the growing number of students experiencing emotional distress.

The Mental Health Landscape
Gallup/Lumina Survey

48%
of bachelor's students say they **frequently feel emotional stress**

69%
of four-year students who considered stopping-out **listed emotional stress as the reason why**
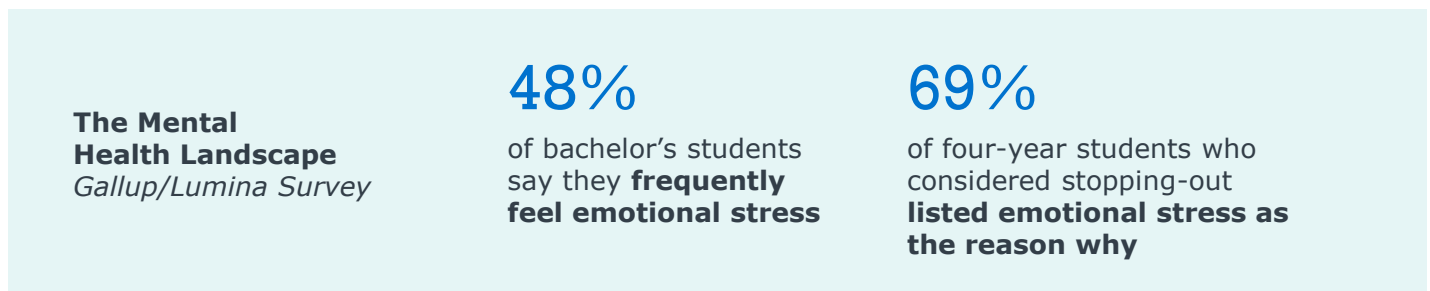
In moments of distress, **students should encounter support without added hurdles**—a principle that prioritizes seamless access to assistance during challenging times. This may involve enhancing communication channels, providing clearer information on available resources, and ensuring that students can easily connect with the appropriate support personnel when needed.

By attending to the mental and emotional dimensions of well-being, practitioners can help students redirect their focus toward their education.

When current students are experiencing stress or other mental health challenges, do they have difficulty connecting with the right person and/or resources easily?

n=72
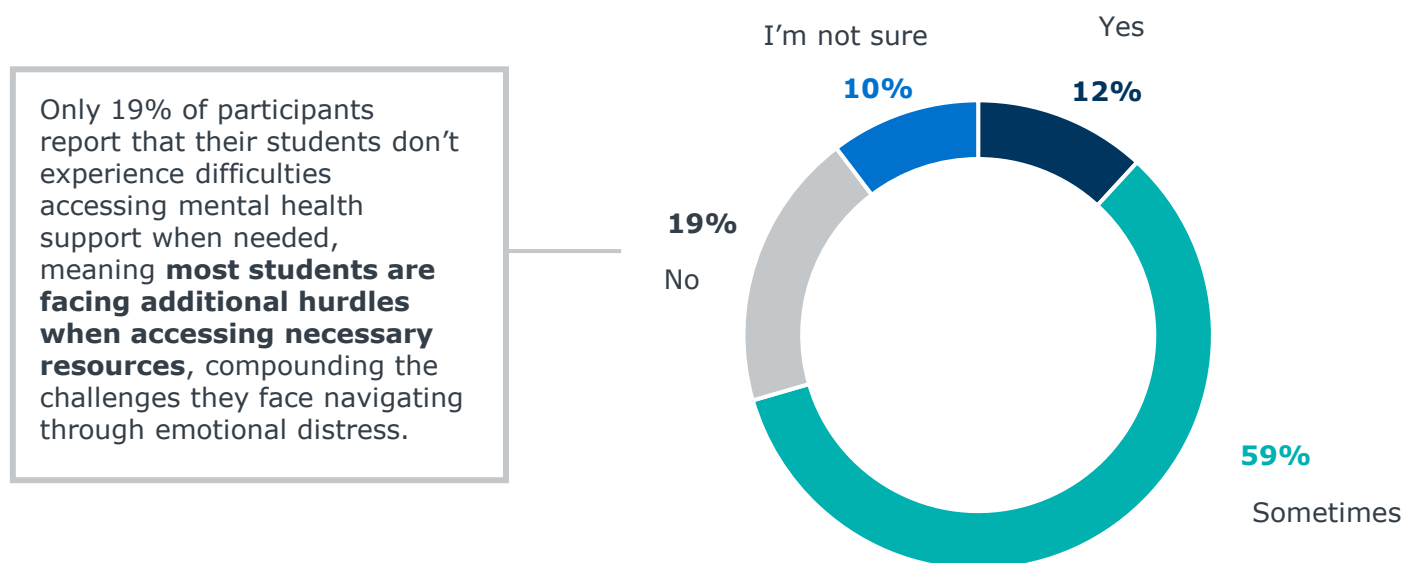
Only 19% of participants report that their students don't experience difficulties accessing mental health support when needed, meaning **most students are facing additional hurdles when accessing necessary resources**, compounding the challenges they face navigating through emotional distress.

I'm not sure **10%**

Yes **12%**

No **19%**

Sometimes **59%**

Combating Service Gaps

SECTION **3**

A Customer Service Approach to Success

Five Steps You Can Take to Close Service Gaps on Your Campus

1

Invest in customer service professional development

Participate in customer service professional development, which serves as a foundational pillar for narrowing service gaps in an educational setting. By infusing comprehensive training and principles into student-facing interactions and processes, institutions can significantly enhance the overall quality of their services.

2

Audit your processes to identify technology and workflow bottlenecks

Invest time in process mapping and evaluating major bottlenecks. Establish a baseline for customer service performance. For prolonged wait points, enhance communication through automated responses, such as an email indicating an expected response time of 24 hours.

3

Check in with students about their experiences

Stay connected with your students by conducting surveys, examining data, and actively seeking feedback to pinpoint major friction points. This is also an opportunity to engage students in discussions about positive experiences to replicate success.

4

Tech-enable manual processes and embrace self-guidance tools

Alleviate the workload on your staff and provide quicker solutions for students by enabling technology to handle high-volume, high-frequency tasks. This could include implementing email campaigns with essential information, ensuring website currency, and optimizing digital resource centers for easy access.

5

Use data insights to proactively anticipate what students need

Stay ahead of potential questions before they arise. By utilizing technology and surveying students, you can identify patterns, such as increased requests for advising appointments during specific times of the year, enabling proactive staffing adjustments to meet their needs efficiently.

Source: EAB interviews and analysis.

Technology as a
Customer Service Asset

4

Resources for Tech-Enabled Customer Service

Each interaction you have with students as they start their college journey should center the individual student, their interests, and the unique value that your institution can provide to them. Use the resources below to learn more about how you can leverage technology to close customer service gaps.

Select Resources

Frictionless Services

Streamline your services and meet the needs of your students more intentionally.

- The Modern Student Experience (resource center)
- 30 Student Success Priorities for the 2020s (blog)
- Are Your Early Alerts Helping or Triggering? (podcast)
- Is your institution 'Gen P' ready? (blog)

Holistic Well-Being Support

Align staff, resources, and services that attend to students' personal needs across mental, physical, and financial well-being.

- How to Optimize Your Student Communications Strategy (toolkit)
- 5 Ways You Can Offer the Right Support (blog)
- Student Success Starts with Mental Health: 4 Ways Technology Can Help Promote Student Well-being (podcast)
- Adapting Student Success Technology to Meet Rising Mental Health Demand (insight paper)

Integrated Technology: The Essential Resource for a Modern Campus
The digital ecosystem of tomorrow connects data and applications beneath the surface
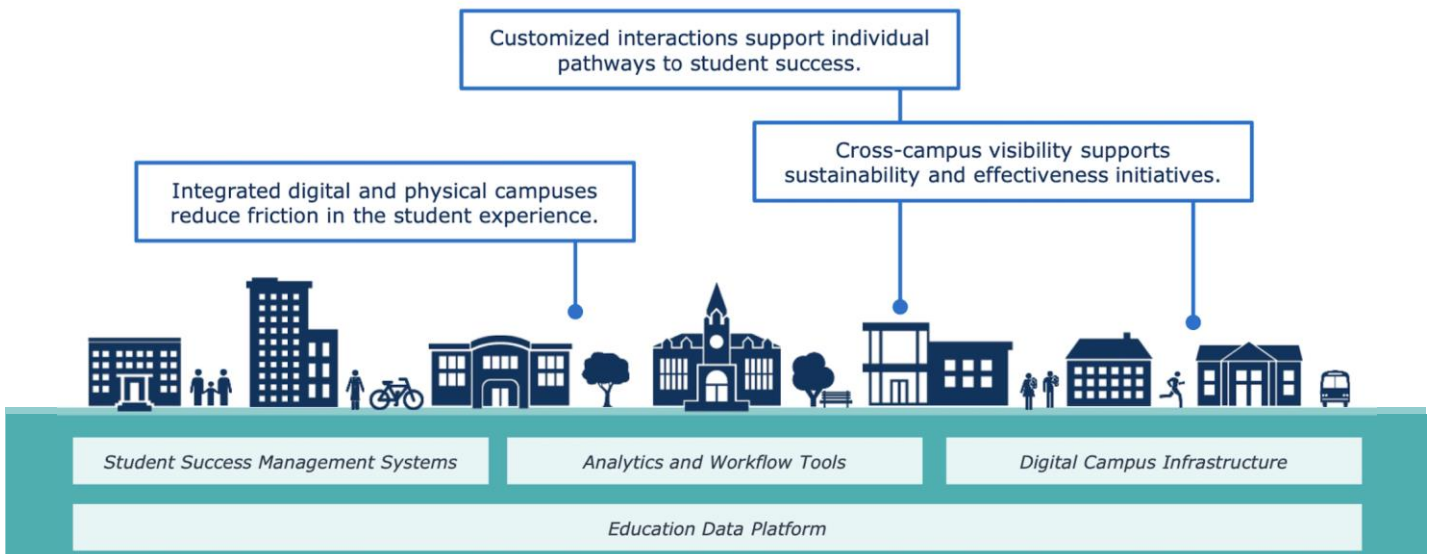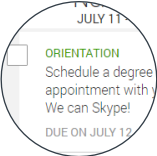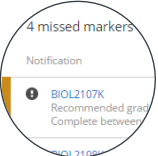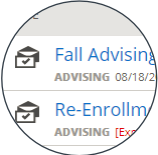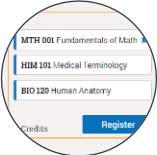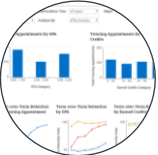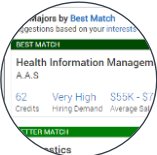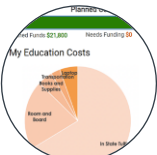
Modernize Your Campus with Navigate360

The Leading Student CRM for Higher Education

Built on a decade of research, Navigate360, higher education's leading student CRM, helps 850+ institutions improve recruitment, onboarding, enrollment, and retention for more than 10 million students. Navigate360 unites administrators, faculty, staff, and students into a collaborative network to measurably improve student outcomes.

Learn more or request a demo at **www.eab.com/Navigate360**.
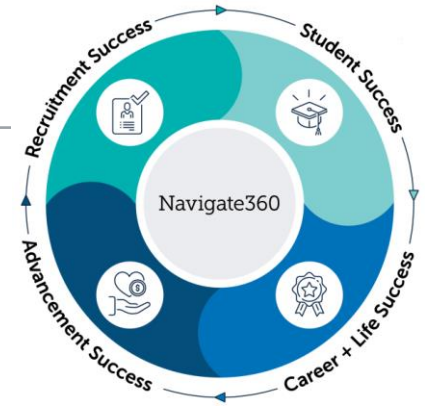
Staff Workflow & Automation	Student Engagement Hub	Reporting & Analytics
Smart Student Profile Actionable academic, financial, and behavioral data to support holistic coordinated care	**Pivotal Moments Path** In-app onboarding and ongoing guidance organized by due date	**Predictive Analytics** Identify and prioritize student interventions based on likely need for support
Campaign Management Mass outreach and multimodal communication at scale	**Collaborative Academic Planner** Degree maps, course catalog, requirements, and credit tracking with advisor oversight	**Effectiveness Analytics** Impact assessment of interventions across student groups
Appointment Scheduling Flexible timetable for students to schedule within the availability of faculty and staff	**Student Surveys** Interactive surveys and polls for new student intake, exploring majors, sharing needs and interests, and more	**Population Health Analytics** Key academic progress and performance indicators identify and assess interventions
NEW: Recruitment Management Reach and engage prospective students and applicants through campaigns, analytics, and list management	**Financial Planner** Help students discover likely expenses and identify funding to mitigate excess debt	**Historical Trend Analytics** Analyze historical data to support institution-level and program-level decision-making

OUR PARTNERS

850+
Partner institutions

10M+
Students served

OUR IMPACT

3.5%
Typical improvement in graduation rate

5:1
ROI based on 500 partner value stories

YOUR NEXT STEPS   **Schedule** a student experience consultation by contacting **eabcommunications@eab.com** or visit us online at **eab.com/Navigate360**

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Background on EAB's Student Customer Service Survey

SECTION

5

Survey Overview

Who was invited?

The Student Customer Service Survey was shared with university educators of all ranks and roles throughout the United States in the fall of 2023. Three of the questions included the option for open-ended responses and were synthesized in addition to the closed-response survey questions.

All responses were anonymous.

Who responded?

95 college and university practitioners

56% of respondents are EAB partners (meaning they have at least one EAB technology or service such as Navigate360)

Professional Role

What best describes your role at your institution?
n=95

- Other 19%
- President 1%
- Provost 2%
- VP or AVP 23%
- Dean 7%
- Director 42%
- Advisor 5%
- Faculty 1%
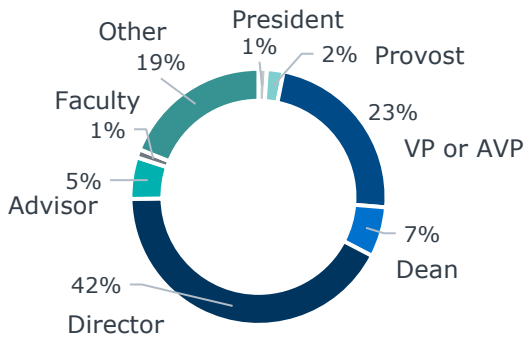
Institution Size

What's your institution's total enrollment?
n=95

- Over 50,000 7%
- 25,000-50,000 14%
- Under 5,000 23%
- 15,000-25,000 19%
- 5,000-15,000 37%

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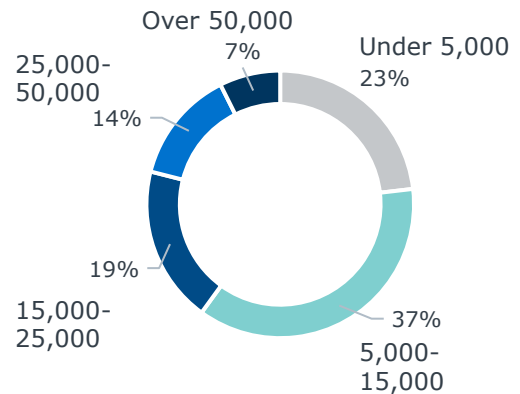
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ABOUT EAB

At EAB, our mission is to make education smarter and our communities stronger. We work with thousands of institutions to drive transformative change through data-driven insights and best-in-class capabilities. From kindergarten to college to career, EAB partners with leaders and practitioners to accelerate progress and drive results across five major areas: enrollment, student success, institutional strategy, data analytics, and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). We work with each partner differently, tailoring our portfolio of research, technology, and marketing and enrollment solutions to meet the unique needs of every leadership team, as well as the students and employees they serve. Learn more at eab.com.