5 steps
to designing an ideal
student experience

Learn how to define a student experience that
drives enrollment, retention and graduation

Blackboard

High expectations

It's no secret that today's students arrive with very high expectations for their education experience, regardless of their aspirations or age.

Whether they are traditional on-campus freshmen or adult learners completing a degree online, most students seek the same highly customized and intuitive customer-driven experiences that they enjoy in the consumer world. Industry leaders, like Apple and Amazon that have mastered immediate convenience, have raised the bar and set the new standard for service. Many students also want to be a part of a learning community where they feel connected to their institution of choice as well as their fellow students.

They look for a school that understands their needs and communicates with them in a way that resonates and inspires. In other words, whether online or on campus, students still look for a learning culture and community with which they can identify.

In response, higher education leaders across the nation are looking critically at their systems, processes, and policies in an effort to meet these evolving student expectations. They see an ecosystem that is often antiquated and stressed, and they are fielding complaints from students daily on issues ranging from small inconveniences, like paper documents and forms, to big challenges, like an inability to easily switch majors or transfer credits.

The sources for these pain points vary. Sometimes, an institution that has experienced rapid growth finds that their established systems and processes can no longer provide adequate support. In other cases, too many years of "doing more with less" has taken a toll on quality and efficiency of services. Perhaps a dramatic shift toward online programs has compounded the lack of campus culture and community for online learners. Regardless of the exact root cause, many institutions across the U.S. feel the need to redesign the student experience and upgrade infrastructure.

Blackboard

What it takes to bridge the chasm

Tackling this challenge can seem daunting. Faced with large projects already in motion, the ongoing tide of new enrollments, and significant budget and resource obstacles, many leaders have had to make do with what they have, chipping away at shortfalls wherever possible. Sometimes, a major technology system like a Customer Relationship Management tool (CRM) is put into place with the hopes that it will connect disparate communications, automate more processes, and serve as the panacea for an inadequate student experience.

But what we know from working with many institutions is that these improvements, while important efforts, are often not enough to alter the experience to the degree that's needed. If an institution is looking to impact retention rates, degree completion, alumni contributions, and a student's sense of lifelong belonging, then a holistic, student-centric approach is essential and requires intensive coordination and collaboration across departments.

To that end, Blackboard developed a framework specifically designed to help higher education insitutions optimize the student experience.

This e-book can serve as the first step in understanding our comprehensive approach, which leverages aspects of an innovative mindset used by product developers called design thinking, as well as traditional quantative analysis and human-centered design.

Blackboard

Institutions must rise to the challenge of designing a more fluid, autonomous student experience.

5 steps to designing a student-centric experience

Truly understanding the student experience requires more than simply responding to statistics or reacting to anecdotal evidence; it requires actively understanding your learners' motivations, your institutional culture, and the manner in which you realize your mission from multiple qualitative and quantitative perspectives, then converting those findings into action.

In working with institutions of all types and sizes, Blackboard has developed a methodology for uncovering gaps and identifying the improvements necessary for defining the most effective student experience. Using a unique combination of design thinking, human-centered design, and qualitative and quantitative analysis, education leaders can reach an understanding of their current state, their ideal experience, and the path to systemic change.

Blackboard

5 steps to designing a student-centric experience

01. Discover
the CURRENT STATE of today's student experience

02. Define
your IDEAL EXPERIENCE and the values that make it unique

03. Identify
the GAPS between the current and the ideal experience

04. Create
a ROADMAP to bridge the gaps with actionable steps

05. Implement
prioritized STEPS over an achievable timeframe

This 5 step methodology leverages both quantitative and qualitative analytics, and is grounded in the tenants of design thinking and human-centered design.

Blackboard

01.
DISCOVER the
current state

DISCOVER the current state

Design thinking has seen a great resurgence across industries in the last several years. This approach is gaining attention in higher education because it helps solve complex, multi-factor problems by leveraging input and insights from the people who will most benefit from its results.

Through its core tenants of immersion, empathy, and iteration, design thinking ensures that the challenges faced by students are understood at a human-to-human level, not assumed or extracted from a research statistic.

Combined with quantitative studies and data analysis, design thinking can lead to deep insight and validation of those professional hunches.

In the Discover phase of our investigation, we rely on student interviews, contextual inquiry, fun exercises that draw out individual perspectives, and immersion in students' daily routines.

Blackboard

8

It is one thing to hear anecdotally that a particular process is confusing; it's another to actually experience the confusion directly and personally.

For example, physically waiting in a long line with other students to speak with a financial aid representative on campus. Having invested empathy with the people living the experience every day provides profound understanding of the challenges.

Also during the Discover phase, we aggregate and review all available data about the student experience. Sources like standard institutional research reports on enrollment and retention trends, and graduated senior or alumni surveys provide valuable insights. Data can also include student demographic information or competitive comparisons. Collecting and reviewing this data in context with learnings from the design-thinking exercises often reveals issues not previously recognized or considered.

Blackboard

The Discover phase includes gathering feedback from internal stakeholders and department leaders.

Faculty and staff add an essential perspective to the information gathered through data and student interviews. Workshops and process mapping with those involved in the hard work of supporting and delivering the student experience on a day-to-day basis can reveal additional opportunities for improvements.

We typically break up the workshops and discussion groups into key phases of the student journey. For each phase, we want to carefully review the major activities, processes, and steps required to move forward. Highlight or call out major breakdowns or issues. What's not working, dysfunctional, antiquated, or redundant? Also, what is working? What can be reused or repeated?

In just a two-hour session, we can quickly uncover the overlaps and redundancies that contribute to some common themes. You may know many of them already, but using the process-mapping exercise to discuss their effects can lead to real positive change.

In just a two-hour session, we can quickly uncover the overlaps and redundancies that contribute to some common themes.

Blackboard

02.
DEFINE your
ideal experience

DEFINE your ideal experience

The Discover process reveals the ideal student experience and the areas of improvement needed to achieve it. Often, we hear things like, "If only we could automate this step," or "We need a single source of truth." These salient themes, combined with known best practices and proven strategies, will provide a framework for the ideal state.

Blackboard
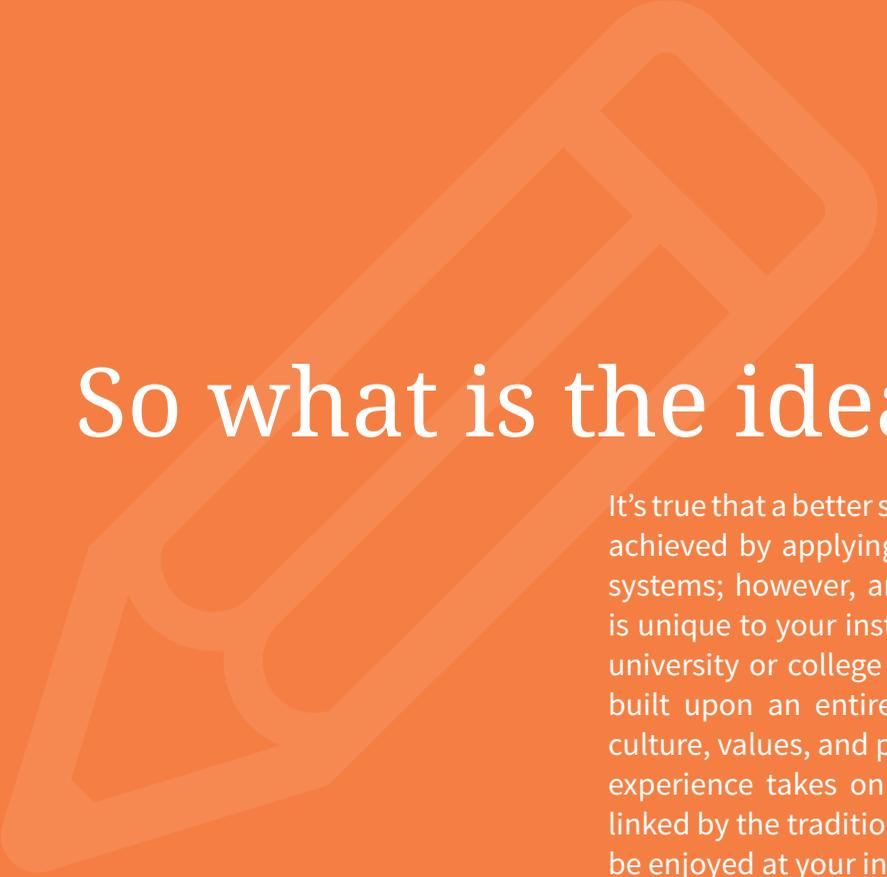
So what is the ideal state?

It's true that a better student experience could be achieved by applying best practices to existing systems; however, an ideal student experience is unique to your institution—one that no other university or college can replicate because it is built upon an entirely different foundation of culture, values, and principles. It is here that the experience takes on a special meaning and is linked by the traditions and legacy that can only be enjoyed at your institution.

The design-thinking methodology provides you with the framework for making your school's unique culture the foundation of the student experience.

Blackboard

03.
IDENTIFY
the gaps
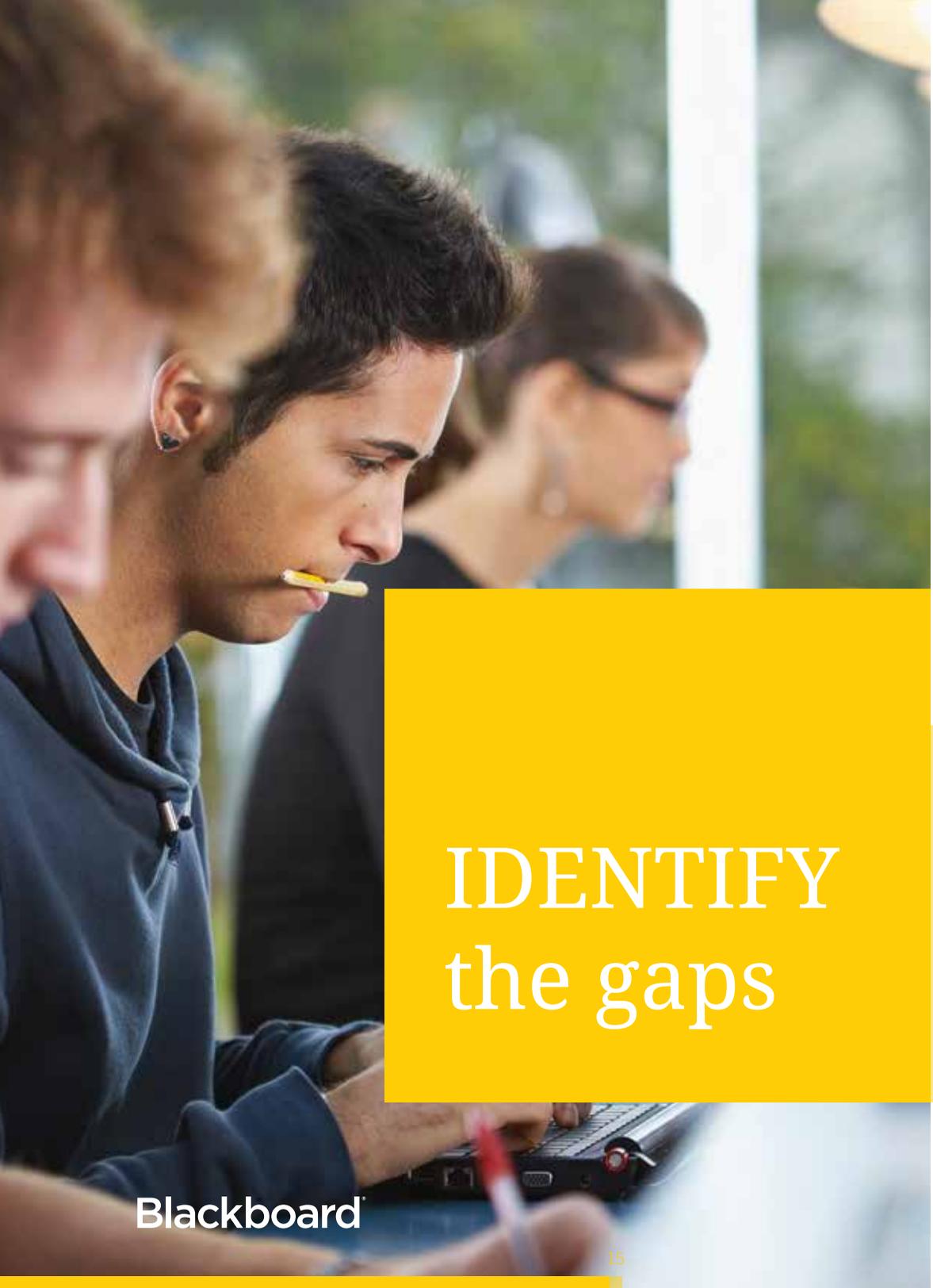
IDENTIFY
the gaps

Blackboard

Throughout the Discover and Define stages, the gaps between the current state and the ideal experience will begin to become more obvious. Some gaps will be glaring and perhaps previously acknowledged. Others will only reveal themselves through more candid and transparent conversations. Identifying the gaps and accepting ownership of them can pose the greatest hurdle to the planning process—their sensitive nature may cause friction and uncertainty. But, once named, they can pave the way for a successful path forward.

In the most robust execution of the methodology, gaps across all stages of the student journey should be documented.

This can lead to literally hundreds of issues or discrepancies, from factors such as "missing data field" to "no consistent process" to "staff cannot complete simple task without multiple layers of approval."

Once collected, these individual issues can typically be bucketed into categories or classifications. Ultimately, the major gaps typically fit within five to ten major categories.
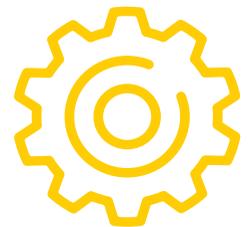
04.
CREATE
a roadmap

CREATE
a roadmap

Moving fluidly from the planning phases into execution requires a roadmap, which serves as a critical tool in the documentation of all possible paths forward. Even if not every path in the roadmap can be immediately addressed, it's essential to capture all ideas because paths will intersect and connect.

All stakeholders—from leaders to staff to students—must have a clear, shared vision of the plan, as well as joint accountability. This will limit opportunities for disconnects and miscommunications that can undermine the implementation process.

Blackboard

The ingredients of a well-designed roadmap for defining and implementing the ideal student experience should include:

Institutional core values and objectives

Specific recommendations for improvement

Steps to implementation

Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)

Timeline and prioritization

A roadmap serves as a critical tool in the documentation of all possible paths forward.

Blackboard

05.
IMPLEMENT
prioritized
steps

IMPLEMENT prioritized steps

Once the roadmap is complete, prioritization and planning become paramount. This requires assigning named owners and timelines, as well as making tough choices regarding other projects that may need to be deprioritized to ensure that roadmap goals are met on time.

Alignment and agreement on priorities for implementation has to happen at all levels within the institution.

Some or many of the roadmap elements may require investment, so at this stage, ROI modeling can help make the case to senior leaders.

When faced with many conflicting choices, successful institutions can achieve quick wins with small changes that yield immediate results while they work through the logistics of the longer-term changes that will have even greater impacts. It's important to note that the "right path" will look very different for each institution.

The implementation phase might be the last step of this process, but it is only the beginning of an institution's journey to redesigning the student experience.

Blackboard

Armed with clearly defined core principles and deep insights into what students seek and value, the path forward will be clear, built on a foundation that can evolve over time without falling back on itself. By putting students at the center, the ideal experience is never out of reach.
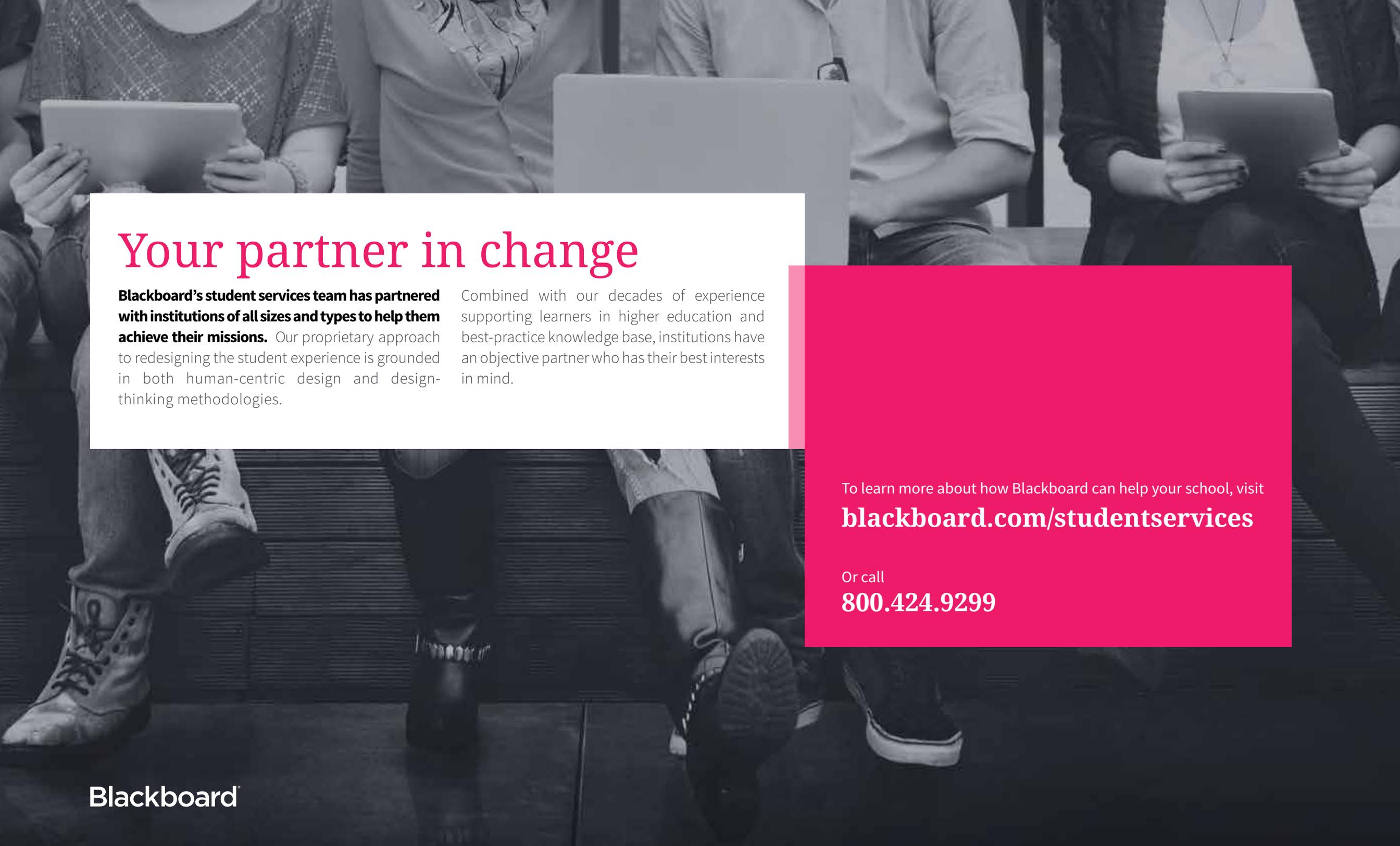
Blackboard®

Your partner in change

Blackboard's student services team has partnered with institutions of all sizes and types to help them achieve their missions. Our proprietary approach to redesigning the student experience is grounded in both human-centric design and design-thinking methodologies.

Combined with our decades of experience supporting learners in higher education and best-practice knowledge base, institutions have an objective partner who has their best interests in mind.

To learn more about how Blackboard can help your school, visit

blackboard.com/studentservices

Or call
800.424.9299

Blackboard®

Blackboard®