Reimagining the Student Support Experience

Why outsourcing student services and technology support is the best solution for higher education

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Editor’s Note: In this Industry Perspective, Craig Chanoff, Vice President of Education Services at Blackboard, talks about how institutions of higher learning can optimize their investment in enrollment and student services through outsourcing student support.

For nearly 400 years, American universities and colleges have had one clear mission: to advance learning and to prepare students for success in the workplace, in the community, and in students’ personal lives.

“That purpose has remained constant for centuries,” says Craig Chanoff, Vice President of Education Services at Blackboard, a company whose stated mission is to challenge conventional thinking and reimagine education.

“But, today,” Chanoff continues, “the world of higher education is clearly undergoing pretty significant change.”

According to Chanoff, universities and colleges are under more pressure than ever to meet greater student expectations, achieve higher enrollment numbers, focus on educational outcomes, and drive solutions to workforce needs. As a result, the cost to fully service a student is increasing.

At the same time, students are questioning the value of higher education. “They’re looking at higher education as a product,” Chanoff says, “and they are scrutinizing every aspect of that product. They are disappointed with the fragmented student experience; and they openly question the misalignment between educational programs and outcomes and the skills they need in the workforce.”

“Today’s students are selective, practical, and results oriented,” Chanoff says. “They want personalization, flexibility, and expediency, they want conveniences similar to what they have when they go to Amazon or Apple.”

“They desire their student services to be integrated and unified across their journey: two clicks and a swipe; mobile apps; self-service; and someone available 24 hours a day, seven days a week.”

At the same time, according to Chanoff, the shift to what is now often referred to as post-traditional learners is complicating the issues. “Today, more than half of all students enrolled in colleges and universities are post-traditional learners,” Chanoff says. “These are students over the age of 22, typically coming from the workforce, first generation in the family to go to college, single parent, military veterans, or some combination of them all. They require different support than your traditional 18-year-old right out of high school.”

Given those changing dynamics, higher institutions are challenged to find new, more effective and efficient ways to connect with students, to market to them, to enroll them, to engage them, and to retain them. “The changing market dynamics,” Chanoff explains, “are leading institutions to reimagine the ways in which they service student demands.”

CREATING EFFICIENCIES IN SERVICING STUDENTS

“So the key question for education leaders,” Chanoff continues, “is how do you engage your customers? How do you create an integrated experience that’s consistent and unified across a student’s educational journey?”

Because the cost of servicing students is greater than it has ever been (and, Chanoff points out, it’s going to continue to go up), institutions need to create efficiencies in how they want to service students and make that experience personalized.

“That’s why institutions are looking at optimization,” Chanoff says. “They look at technology, outsourcing, ways to run their business more effectively and improve how they engage with students with even fewer resources.”

BENEFITS OF OUTSOURCING

Chanoff believes there are significant benefits to outsourcing many different functions, “particularly those that require a strong customer service orientation in their approach.”

The primary benefit of outsourcing, according to Chanoff, is controlling costs. “As you move dollars from salary and

Who’s Going to College?

Only a fraction of the nation’s 18 million undergraduates are traditional students.

- 2-year or less students: 14%
- Part-time students: 12%
- Full-time, for-profit students: 4%
- Full-time, Public or Private not-for-profit over age 24: 41%
- Traditional students: 29%

Source: Education Department (2013)
compensation to professional services, you have ways in which you can manage that spend more effectively. When most of your budget is in the salary bucket, the only way to reduce expenses is by cutting positions; on the other hand, when you have more money in operating expenses, you can work with your various vendors to change scope and costs.”

A second benefit institutions find with outsourcing is the ability to achieve scale that can’t be done with internal resources alone. “Being able to handle off-hours and flexible staffing during peak times of the year is a lot harder to manage on your own,” Chanoff says. “There are significant overhead expenses and processes to manage, and it is especially hard to manage workload during off-peak hours when you can’t maximize the utilization of staff.”

Finally, Chanoff points out that it is difficult for institutions to build world-class, industry-leading, technology-enabled services on their own. “It’s too expensive to implement and scale for a particular institution.”

“Outsourcing partners provide industry leading technology-enabled services, and this is incredibly beneficial for an institution,” Chanoff continues. “They’ve already made those initial investments in workforce management systems, telephony, IT infrastructure, knowledgebase, ticketing, reporting, and quality assurance, among other things. As a result, the institution benefits.”

What’s more, according to Chanoff, outsourcing also allows the institution to focus on their core business issues.

“I don’t think a core function of an IT organization within a higher education institution is running their Tier 1 Help Desk,” Chanoff says. “There are more complex projects and processes that need to be put in place to support the IT initiatives of an institution and removing the Tier 1 Help Desk can focus management’s time on more strategic and forward-thinking areas.”

**OBJECTIONS TO OUTSOURCING**

Despite these benefits, some institutions are concerned about outsourcing for several reasons. “They may be concerned about losing control of resources,” Chanoff says. “Or they may be concerned about being able to fund an outsource initiative without laying off existing staff.

“Yet, many organizations have operating budgets where they have open positions and part-time staff such as student workers,” Chanoff continues. “Repurposing those dollars will get a much bigger return by finding the right outsourcing partner.”

At the same time, Chanoff adds, there is a concern among some administrators that outsourcing creates a perception that the institution doesn’t care about the student. Yet, this is not the case. “When our partners visit our 24 x 7 contact centers and hear how the advisors communicate with their students, faculty, and staff,” Chanoff says, “they realize this service is truly an extension of their team and a better service experience for students than they can provide on their own.”

**HOW BLACKBOARD HELPS WITH OUTSOURCING**

According to Chanoff, since its founding, Blackboard has always been more than a technology company. “It’s a company that’s focused around reimagining the education experience and being a thought leader in the industry.”

Right now, Chanoff says, the industry really needs thought
“Online courses never end, nor should the support. If an institution invests the money to provide 24/7 support for their students, at the end of the day, they will see their profit, via an increase in retention and graduate rates.”
—Veraina Bordeaux, District Ecampus Help Desk Manager, Dallas County Community College District

“At Blackboard, we view these issues holistically and aim to be a partner to assist in overcoming the challenges that higher education is facing today.”

For the past several years, Chanoff points out, Blackboard has invested heavily in a set of solutions that are directly aligned with helping institutions develop seamless student experiences.

“Blackboard Student Lifecycle Services provides services and technology that support students throughout their entire educational pathway,” Chanoff says. “This includes everything from market research and enrollment and retention to admissions, student records, registration, financial aid, IT help desk, and various academic technologies.

According to Chanoff, Blackboard offers a unique combination of technology, services, and data that enables institutions to optimize investments in enrollment and student services throughout all phases of the student lifecycle.

Blackboard has a...

90%
satisfaction rate among clients.

Blackboard is the world’s leading education technology company that is re-imagining education by challenging conventional thinking and advancing new learning models. We rapidly deploy relevant and meaningful technologies and services to meet the needs of the modern day learner and the institutions that serve them, driving success and growth for both. In partnership with higher education, K-12, corporate organizations, and government agencies around the world, we help every learner achieve their full potential.

Interested in learning more about Blackboard’s Student Services? Contact Blackboard for a free 30-minute consultation to discuss your school’s technology support strategy. To schedule your consultation, reach out to Michael Zastudil, Student Services Specialist, at michael.zastudil@blackboard.com.

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