Statement Paper

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As a leader in higher education, I have been tasked by senior leadership to develop an official report on how to address the challenges of decreasing student enrollment and degree completion as tuition rates continue to rise. The following report will explain my plan to address these challenges.

The Challenge

Now more than ever, institutions of higher education are being forced to look at the underlying factors causing decreased enrollment and dropping graduation rates. With spiraling tuition costs, questions pertaining to the value of a college degree, and low placement rates following graduation (Hoey & Parenti, 2014), institutions have a right to be concerned.

The price tag of an education has significantly increased over the years. In fact, between 2005-2006 and 2015-2016, the in-state tuition and fees at public four-year institutions increased an average rate of 3.4% per year beyond inflation (CollegeBoard. n.d.). As a result, institutions have had difficulty advancing as many graduates into the workforce because the costs to begin or continue college is out of reach. Additionally, the high cost of attendance has hurt institutions' ability to deliver on their core commitment to make social and economic mobility a realistic goal for average Americans (Yankelovich, 2009).

Even more, although student enrollment has been declining, total student loan debt is higher than ever at 1.2 trillion dollars (Schultz, 2015). In response, students, parents, and board members have been applying a lot of pressure on institutions to create a more accessible and affordable educational experience. It's no secret that the success of an institution and the success of its students are inseparable (Levitz, Noel, Richter, 1999).

The Idea

Although many institutions are just barely keeping up with advancements in technology, continued advancement will require institutions to adapt their educational systems and processes to keep up with the latest technological advancements. However, despite the promise of technology, its integration throughout higher education has not been rapid (Board, n.d.).

The big question is: how do we address the challenges of enrollment and graduation rates? The answer is simple: we use technology to our advantage. Institutions which adapt to technology and become content producers will survive and flourish (Lucas, 2016). Embracing technology has potential to lower the price tag of an education for students. Using technology can be cost-effective as technology can reduce the labor-intensive nature of higher education and permit the reorganization necessary to make institutions more responsive and competitive (Board, n.d.).

I suggest that we invest in the creation of *Platform*. Platform is a web-based application tool that can also be used as a mobile app to make the educational experience better for the institution and the students. This will appeal to incoming students as the most technologically savvy generation of students are entering college and it's undeniable that technology is an integral part of most college students' lives (Viner, 2014).

Platform can be used as an add-on to the student management system our institution uses. Students would have the ability to use Platform as a tool to eliminate confusion in the admission, financial aid, and advising processes. This includes keeping the student updated with what items need to be submitted and when, what the timelines look like, and important items they need to be reminded about.

Here's an example of how the application works: John Doe is applying to our institution and is directed to Platform to complete his application for admission. Once completed, a progress bar would appear and congratulate John on submitting his application. It would then tell him that his application will be reviewed within 10 business days and he will be notified once a decision has been made. Platform then suggests that John complete his Free Application for Federal Student Aid (or FAFSA) and provides him the link to the application. John will then have the option to select 'yes, I have submitted my FAFSA' or 'not yet, remind me later'. Once John selects 'yes, I have submitted my FAFSA', Platform will then congratulate him for completing his FAFSA and informs John that his FAFSA will be received by the institution within 10 business days from when he is admitted.

Two days later, John logs back into Platform and the progress bar appears to have moved further to the right indicating that he's now eight days away from the admissions decision. Eight days later, a notification pops up on his smart-phone saying "Congratulations, you've been admitted, please review Platform for the next steps". John logs into his Platform and sees that his progress bar has moved further to the right. It indicates he's now 10 days away from the institution receiving his FAFSA. He can now make a request to his high school to have his official transcripts sent to the institution and Platform provides the address where they need to be sent. In essence, John is able to go through the entire admission, financial aid, and advising processes though his smartphone until he has completed all steps required to begin his classes.

Platform can also be used as a reminder tool that will remind students of important deadlines, such as when they need to complete their FAFSA each year, when they need to enroll in new courses each semester, when their parking pass will expire, etc. By providing a visually

appealing progress bar and the ability to access information through any smartphone or

web-based utility, there's no a doubt that Platform would be helpful. The convenience and

constant access provided by mobile devices, particularly smartphones, will create a competitive

advantage for Platform as 92% of teens go online daily (Modo Labs Team, 2016).

The Who, What, Why, & How

Many institutions report that students who submit on the date of the deadline assume that

everything transmitted and was received, but sometimes things are lost in cyberspace (Rubin,

2013). Did you notice that the institution did not receive any calls or emails from John asking

about timelines? This also removed the need for three different departments asking the student

for additional documentation or information he may have already submitted. Not only does this

save time and resources for the institution, but we just made the whole process of beginning

college much easier for John as there was no confusion on any steps involved.

This in itself is a huge stride for higher education as many potential and current students

get discouraged about beginning or continuing as there's too many obstacles and no central

location to get all of the information they need. Many times too much information can cause

students to be overwhelmed and can stop them from making a decision or taking the next steps

and too little information can result in an shaken perspective on how to move forward

(Alderman, n.d.).

The new generation of college students are expecting processes related to enrolling and

continuing college to be simple. This is what they know and it's not something they're ready to

experience otherwise. However, the reality is that students struggle with navigating the college

enrollment process (Coca, Nagaoka, & Roderick, 2009, p. 9), which leads to challenges in

enrollment and retention for many institutions. Simplicity can go a long ways in boosting enrollment and keeping students on track to complete their degree.

Another benefit to using the Platform is it eliminates a lot of time, energy, and money in servicing students through communication over the phone and by email as all the information they need is readily available to them. By using Platform, the institution may be able to reduce costs associated with staffing, which can have a positive impact towards decreasing the spiraling tuition rates. More than a third of the cost of a college education is attributable to the cost of administrative labor (Lapovsky, 2013).

In order for the Platform to become a reality, there are many steps that need to be taken. We first need to market the idea to the the Student Affairs leadership team. This would include members of leadership from Admissions, Financial Aid, and Academic Support departments which have a stake in how Platform would affect their processes. Assuming we received the green light from Student Affairs, we would then present the idea to the President and board members of the institution.

If Platform is approved, a project team would be assembled to make this idea a reality. The project team would consist of a creative development team responsible for outlining the needs of the application, a technical and programming team responsible for creating the application and testing it, a training team responsible for educating and training each department on campus about the application, a research and marketing team responsible for getting the application approved through mobile application stores and adding it to the institution's web pages, and a project manager in charge of keeping each team on task and providing updates to leadership teams across the institution so they are aware of progress being made.

With any new initiative, there are always going to be obstacles. For Platform, there are two. The first is that the institution must find the monetary resources to fund the creation and sustainability of Platform and the second is keeping Platform's student information safe and secure from possible hackers.

Although these seem like big obstacles, anything can be overcome. For example, a Director of Parking Services at Harvard University came up with an idea to create an app to make the parking system on campus better. This app had the ability to show students, faculty, and staff where open spaces were located in specific lots through GPS and even programmed the capability for car owners to pay for parking through their smartphone. This idea was presented to a board of trustees and now it's a reality. The use of technology has been a proven avenue for supporting sustainability efforts, saving costs, and providing campus stakeholders a pleasant experience (Fliegler, 2013). This example required an upfront investment, but it turned around and resulted in saving more resources for the institution in addition to making a positive change to the culture of parking on campus. The same can happen with Platform. Additionally, resources saved can lead into solving the security issues as those funds can be used to hire a tech team who can support the security and integrity of student information in Platform.

The Conclusion

This idea is unique as no other institutions are offering an online app or web-based tool that can be used by students to simplify the processes involved of attending an institution. The objective of Platform is to meet the needs of the new incoming generations as students need access to their information anytime, anywhere, and as many times as they need (Say, 2012). In addition, it has found a way to make the price tag more affordable and ensuring better retention

as processes are simplified. Americans are ready for a renewal of our nation's higher education system and they overwhelmingly believe that institutions should reduce the cost of an education (Lumina Foundation, 2013). Platform is not only going to re-shape the sometimes confusing processes related to enrolling and continuing college each year, but it's going to allow our institution to get ahead of the curve of advancing technology in higher education.

I believe that Platform is the next step for our institution as digital technology is the core strategic enabler of learning in higher education (Brown, 2015). It's our responsibility to enhance the student learning experience (Inside Higher Ed, 2016) and Platform is a way to do that. However, the decision of taking the next step is up to the institution as educators know all too well the pain of making a wrong decision (Raskin, 2012). Whether the institution embraces innovation depends not on whether outsiders think they need to, but on their own readiness to do so (Evans, n.d., p. 1).

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