

Student Services
by **Blackboard**

It's Time for a New Approach:

Partnerships Increase ROI
for Higher Ed Institutions



Are higher education institutions fighting impossible odds? Students expect more and more from their schools – like all-inclusive, full-service education propositions – and are fully prepared to move on to the next institution if they can't get what they want. And, at the same time, student support centers are overwhelmed with staff shortages, budget limitations, and the pressure to do it all with limited resources – all while growing enrollments and improving retention and efficiency.

Most institutions approach these challenges in one of two unsatisfactory ways: either outsource to a disconnected provider or continue to muddle on, hoping that staff will just get faster, better, or more productive by sheer force of will. Fortunately for your students and your support staff, there's a better way. Select vendors are evolving beyond disjointed outsourcing arrangements and stepping up to be true partners – partners who enhance your staff's efforts instead of replacing them, who add to your oversight and allow you to do more with less.

If you're still operating under long-held assumptions about outsourcing, it's time to reevaluate. Here's a look at three ways a robust vendor partnership can help you overdeliver on important higher institutional education priorities.

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A man in a dark suit and patterned tie stands in a library, looking down at a laptop screen. He is holding a yellow pen in his right hand. The background shows bookshelves filled with books.

1. Vendor partnerships generate a more effective use of limited staff

We've yet to encounter a student services team that felt they had all the resources and budget necessary to get their work done. Instead, teams must often accomplish the following tasks (and more) on a limited budget with a limited staff:

- **Marketing the institution**
- **Responding to inquiries in minutes or hours, not weeks**
- **Troubleshooting financial aid requests**
- **Creating and implementing critical student programs**
- **Providing urgent services in growing areas of need like diversity and IT security**

Despite a team's best intentions, students on both ends of the spectrum – with quick questions and time-consuming situations – are often left without the hands-on support and programs they need to thrive because the services staff is expected to be all things to all people.



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Justin Louder, associate vice provost at Texas Tech University

Institutions that partner with vendors enhance their ability to serve students because they can divert basic requests to their partner and focus on the most strategic and specialized tasks themselves. As a result, the people you hired for a particular position can actually focus on using the skills you hired them for:

- Financial aid team members don’t have to spread out their time with 40 students with a Level I need and can instead tend to the complex needs of a few students with a Level III need.
- Campus IT specialists aren’t drained by password resets all day, so they’re able to partner with the Office of Inclusion and better support the need for alternative learning methods and strategic technology improvements.
- Admissions staff members don’t need to worry about being roped into work with the marketing department to develop

messaging but can instead focus on telling the institution’s story and moving prospective students through the pipeline.

“Working with a vendor partner has allowed me to change my priorities for my staff,” says Justin Louder, associate vice provost at Texas Tech University. “Now, instead of spending time answering general email from students about how to do this or that, they’re able to do what I originally hired them for: work with faculty to build high-quality online programs.”

“We’ve also been able to move people out of a support role to help the marketing department ramp up our marketing initiatives and get additional students enrolled in our programs,” Louder continues. “We’re working on a goal of increasing enrollment by 50% by 2020 and, with the flexible support of a vendor partnership, we’re on track to reach it.”

2. Vendor partnerships result in a superior student experience

Across the country and around the world, institutions are seeing a dramatic shift in student expectations as a result of technological advancement and heightened consumer expectations.¹ The result? Offering a competitive and strenuous education is no longer a competitive strategy for attracting students and growing enrollments – students expect a comprehensive, full-service, tech-savvy support experience in addition to the type and quality of the program.²

Asking staff members to meet higher and higher standard - with shrinking budgets and resources and an inadequate technology infrastructure - simply won't work. And that's where vendor partnerships come in. Instead of pushing a core function out to a third-party without accountability or cooperation, a vendor partnership acts as a valuable extension of your team so you can provide a superior student experience that is exactly what your students need while retaining the transparency and control you need to own the student experience.





“PARTNERING WITH A VENDOR TO EXPAND OUR SUPPORT HOURS AND ONLINE CAPABILITIES HAS BROUGHT INCREDIBLE BENEFITS TO OUR FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS AND CONTINUING STUDENTS.”

Lisa Hansen, director of OneStop student services at Wichita State University

“Partnering with a vendor to expand our support hours and online capabilities has brought incredible benefits to our first-year students and continuing students,” says Lisa Hansen, director of OneStop student services at Wichita State University. “If a student has a burning question at 2AM or needs to drop or add a class by a deadline but it’s after office hours, they can look up the instructions and get the task taken care of independently.”

Not only can a partner help your limited staff to better serve your students on a day-to-day basis, but it can also help you respond more quickly to the increased demands that come with seasonal spikes in inquiries and enrollments.

“We recently helped an institution market their graduate program and delivered a 20% increase in inquiries,” says Jason Smith, director of enrollment and retention services at Blackboard. “If they had tried to manage that volume in-house, it would have taken six to 12 months to hire and train staff to meet that demand or settle for subpar customer service by getting whoever’s on hand to cover the phones. But working with a partner that can scale up and down in a matter of days meant they could be more agile in meeting those high-volume demands.”



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3. Vendor partnerships deliver a higher ROI on your investment

ROI is what really defines the difference between conventional outsourcing and vendor partnerships. When you outsource to a vendor in the traditional sense, you're exchanging a contracted amount of money for a specific service. When that service is complete, the contract is complete, and the relationship is over. With a vendor partnership, on the other hand, you're establishing a symbiotic investment. Your partner is only as successful as you are, which means they're equally invested in your long-term success and growth.

"Outsourcing is just about price," says Smith. "It's just a transaction. But when you truly partner with a vendor, they become an extension of your institution no matter where they are. They're involved at a much higher level, like offsite employees who just happen to be compensated by another entity."

How does this reciprocal relationship play out in real life? It means you can partner with a team of dedicated marketing experts rather than hiring five marketing managers or putting a task on the to-do list of a willing but inexperienced team member. You can access data and analytics your institution can't capture and make more informed decisions about programs to add and expand.

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You can provide more sophisticated training and personalized and integrated data for people answering the phone and deliver more engaging and comprehensive student support. And you can achieve incremental yearly changes in your most important metrics, such as attracting and retaining more students, which will pay off year after year.

Along with a higher ROI and a greater commitment to your institution's success, vendor partnerships require extra attention and effort. Here are a few tips that Smith offers to help you make the most of a vendor partnership:

Be involved.

Don't leave your partner to go it alone as if they're just another outsourcing vendor. You'll get a much better return on the relationship if you engage with them. Get them involved in on-campus meetings, make regular visits to their office, and welcome them to the team with a mug or t-shirt with your school's logo – whatever you can do to make them feel a part of the team.

Build trust.

Partnerships fail if you don't build trust from the beginning. Don't invest in training and then forget about them. Instead, ask open-ended questions and listen to the answers. Take action on their

insights and let them know how it turned out. Show that you're 100% invested in the work they do and they'll reciprocate.

Listen.

When you're engaging and building trust with a partner, they'll start to feel more comfortable reaching out to tell you what they're hearing and trends they're seeing. This is an enormous benefit to bringing in a partner who truly wants to see your organization improve and is willing to give you feedback.

In the face of rising student expectations and plunging budgets and resources, higher education institutions that want to grow enrollments and exceed expectations are approaching vendor partnerships with renewed confidence. If your institution could benefit from a more effective use of your limited staff, an exceptional student experience, and a higher ROI on your student support expenditures, it's time to consider working with an established vendor partner.

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About Student Services by Blackboard

Over the past 13 years, Blackboard has grown beyond its learning technology roots and developed capabilities to help institutions make a measurable impact on the student experience and ensure your institution's long-term success. The solutions we deploy help our clients grow enrollment, improve retention and provide needed support to the institution.

While Blackboard is best recognized in the market for our technology and software, Student Services is a separate division within Blackboard. Our portfolio encompasses marketing, enrollment and retention coaching, as well as one stop and help desk services.

Our marketing, enrollment and retention services help institutions reach and enroll more prospective students. In doing so, they grow revenue and enrollment.

Our One Stop and Help Desk services provide support to both students and the institution. One Stop serves students by removing barriers to graduation and Help Desk makes the institution more efficient by providing technical support and reducing costs.

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Sources

1. “Nearly All Prospective Students Want a Tech-Savvy Institution,” Campus Technology, <https://campustechnology.com/articles/2017/11/01/nearly-all-prospective-students-want-a-tech-savvy-institution.aspx>
2. “Success by design: Improving outcomes in American higher education,” Deloitte Insights, <https://www2.deloitte.com/insights/us/en/industry/public-sector/improving-student-success-in-higher-education.html>

