Part 1: Perspectives from the Field

We are in a new era for higher education. Institutional leaders must adopt new strategies and models to survive and thrive and to guarantee a sustainable, successful future for their institutions and their students. This means offering students an education that is more affordable, personalized, and relevant. Institutions are not only grappling with better methods and innovations to accommodate students’ needs, they are also struggling with economic pressures to define the value of a degree, increase college completion rates, and provide high-quality education, while lowering tuition costs.

From our conversations, we identified three key themes about what it takes to define a clear and unique value proposition. We also learned about the emerging, promising choices certain institutions are making to meet the needs and demands of today’s students, amidst changing economic dynamics. These conversations helped surface models of transformational change that are leading to noticeable results for students – in particular, the new student majority.

Today’s higher education students are different from college students 25 years ago. The once traditional college goer has been replaced by a new student majority—low-income students, first-generation college students, and students of color. And with this ever-diverse student population comes new demands, requiring more personalized interventions and technologies to address their changing needs and goals.

**Getting Ahead of the Curve**

How can colleges and universities stay ahead of the curve and uphold the promise of a valuable degree to their students? Institutional leaders pointed to three distinct themes they think should be considered to manage the increasing and inevitable changes in higher education.

Most leaders acknowledged that a one-size-fits-all strategy is no longer sufficient to be successful or sustainable in today’s world. In other words, **institutions must define a differentiated value proposition and be deliberate in the execution against it** – which usually means making tough choices and tradeoffs. Leaders highlighted promising choices certain institutions are making to ensure student results.
Another theme among institutional leaders was a **lack of dramatic reshaping of their institutions**. While almost all colleges and universities are experimenting and tweaking their models, few institutions have radically restructured their postsecondary experience.

The third common theme among institutional leaders is that transformation is not easy; it is a long, challenge-filled process that requires unwavering dedication and visionary leadership. The leaders interviewed suggested a set of recommendations to help institutions overcome hurdles they might face during strategic changes, such as engaging stakeholders early and often, using data to communicate and provide validity, and prioritizing what matters most for the institution and students, among others.

"We’ve done this pretty much the same way for, not decades but centuries and I think the door opened by the digital revolution is opening us to a whole new clientele that’s really going to change the profile of higher education for the better.”

– Nancy Zimpher, Chancellor of SUNY
Institutional Snap Shot | Georgia State University

Georgia State University (GSU) is a leader in increasing student access and completion using data-driven student supports, but that has not always been the case.

In 2003, GSU’s faculty and leadership recognized that GSU was falling short in its mission to serve the surrounding Atlanta community. After a year-long strategic visioning process, GSU refocused its value proposition on the promise of student success and completion for a diverse, urban population historically prone to dropping out. Not only did GSU define a concrete value proposition, it also organized interventions based on its strategy and was deliberate in the execution, including data analysis and measurement of successes.

GSU has been managing this major strategic shift for 10 years with two waves of initiatives. The first initiatives were organizational transformations in support of student success, including a new leadership role of Vice President of Enrollment Management and Student Success, overseeing the offices that interact with students from application to graduation. The second wave was a portfolio of interventions developed to increase enrollment of underserved groups and likelihood of student success. Both were based on robust analytics and evidence.

GSU leadership increased student access and completion by focusing on transformation using four of the 10 major value propositions: student profile, primary student focus, affordability, and student supports. Using the value proposition framework, GSU was able to make strategic choices that best aligned with the goals of the institution to ensure increased student success.

A few of the interventions implemented by GSU included a restructured, proactive academic advising system to provide predictive analysis and targeted coaching for students and timely feedback for advisors, and the Keep Hope Alive Program dedicated to provide financial support and coaching to help students regain lost scholarships.

As a result of GSU’s commitment to using data and measurement and implementing initiatives to drive student outcomes, it has seen significant progress toward the goals of diversity and completion. Notably, GSU has had an increase in students eligible for Pell Grants, now 58 percent, and six-year graduation rates, from 32 percent in 2003 to 54 percent in 2014.