Amid a charged political climate, experts discuss critical race theory.

WOOING INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

Challenges remain, but the future looks brighter for those studying and seeking more opportunities in the U.S.
Strategies for implementing access control systems in higher ed

Q&A with Ron Shaffer, Technology Business Development for Education, SALTO Systems

There are a lot of choices when it comes to access control systems campuses could use. What should drive the decisions of higher ed leaders in this area? Many decision makers don’t take the most important factor into account: the end user experience. It is the experience of your campus users—students, faculty and staff—that matters most when deciding what type of access control systems to implement. Other important factors to consider when deciding on access control systems include:

• Whether a system is easy to use, has an intuitive design, and provides clear user feedback
• The durability of the hardware
• The long-term reliability of the system, and any ongoing administration requirements

What are the most overlooked aspects of implementing access control systems on campuses? Think about it in terms of “Day 1” versus “Day 2.” During the Day 1 phase, higher ed leaders are focused on the features of the system, the initial installation costs and whether the new system meets their current needs.

But during the Day 2 phase, new questions arise concerning the complexity of the interface, network dependency, monthly or yearly user or access point fees, credential compatibility and other ongoing costs. As time goes on, institution leaders may ask more questions, such as:

• How are my users affected during a network outage?
• Is access still permitted in a power outage?
• Is the system scalable to meet future growth within our current network environment?
• How do we maintain IP addresses, network switching and routing design?

These questions are often overlooked at an earlier stage, but it’s important to consider these Day 2 issues in the decision-making process.

What are some best practices when implementing a new access control system? Research, research and research! Kick the tires and ask a vendor for an onsite demonstration installation—and use it without any company representative present. Take this opportunity to put the system through its paces. Test and explore every scenario your team can think of.

Look for a system that includes the following features:

• Extensive credential compatibility
• Access points that allow for growth, such as lockers, cabinets, exterior gates, parking gates, glass doors, cylindrical and mortise applications
• Wire free, wireless and wired applications
• Easy I/O data integration with custom or third-party systems
• Mobile iOS and Android applications for remote access assignment

What trends are you seeing on cutting-edge higher ed campuses today? One emerging trend is providing self-service offerings such as kiosks and mobile access credentials to campus users. These provide the ability for a student to cancel their lost or stolen card through a portal, change a pin code and request replacement, all on their own and without involving staff.

Many higher ed leaders who are using mobile credentials are looking to make the most out of this technology, finding ways to customize their existing app to their brand, and ensuring compatibility with iOS and Android devices that utilize Bluetooth and NFC for access control communications.

The future of access control is here, and mobile credentialing offers a level of security, convenience and self-service that enhances the end user experience.
The pandemic boomerang

Just when it was looking like things were returning to normal, the COVID-19 delta variant threw that storyline out the window. The summer spike in cases, mostly among the unvaccinated, has us on our heels again.

As a higher ed leader, you’ve had to make some tough decisions about this fall semester, including whether students and staff must mask up and be vaccinated to slow the spread of the virus.

Students, no doubt, would like nothing better than return to the carefree pre-pandemic days. But it’s likely that some restrictions will still be necessary.

As of this writing in early August, hundreds of colleges and universities have mandated face coverings and vaccinations for a safe return to campus. You can find lists of these schools on our website, updated daily.

“We’ll continue to spotlight successful strategies, innovative programs and more in the coming months in the hope that these examples offer ideas you may want to implement.

If you have a creative solution to tout, don’t hesitate to drop me a line at eweiss@lrp.com

And please note: Our press deadlines don’t accommodate the rapidly changing mask and vaccine environment. For the latest on mandates, please visit universitybusiness.com

—Eric Weiss, executive editor

Reasons to visit UniversityBusiness.com

State-by-state look at colleges requiring COVID-19 vaccines, updated daily

The complete list of higher education institutions mandating vaccination for the fall 2021-22 semester.

bit.ly/mandatoryvax

Mask tracker: A look at which higher ed institutions are imposing new mandates

Hundreds of institutions opt for extra safety this fall.

bit.ly/ubmasks

The 5 factors driving Indiana’s record enrollment surge

The university has launched several simple but effective initiatives over the past year to help meet student needs.

bit.ly/indysurge

Illinois, IBM creating $200M institute on emerging technology

The Discovery Accelerator will allow university students and industry researchers to work on complex global solutions.

bit.ly/illinois-ibm

MIT still No. 1, but U.S. universities fall in world rankings

Harvard, Caltech, Cornell and Duke all experience significant drops while internationals move up.

bit.ly/world-rankings
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EMERGENCY RELIEF

Feds award another $3.2 billion to students hardest hit by pandemic

Historic and under-resourced institutions have another $3.2 billion in emergency grants to support students, after the latest release of American Rescue Plan funds by the U.S. Department of Education.

More than 1,800 institutions are eligible for this batch of Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund grants, which can be used to re-engage disconnected students, expand mental health services, and bolster retention programs that improve graduation rates and workforce preparedness.

“The American Rescue Plan provided critical funds to make sure our nation’s institutions of higher education—particularly those that serve students most impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic—receive the resources they need in order to provide students with a high-quality education and the social, emotional and mental health supports to earn their degrees and thrive,” U.S. Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona said in a statement.

“These institutions have a long history of serving our students—particularly students of color, first-generation college students, and other students who are underrepresented in higher education,” Cardona said.

Some $1.6 billion in funding goes to historically Black colleges and universities with another $1.19 billion earmarked for minority-serving institutions and under-resourced schools eligible for Strengthening Institutions programs, many of which are community colleges.

Tribally controlled colleges and universities will receive $143 million.

So far, the American Rescue Plan has provided more than $10 billion to community colleges, $2.6 billion to HBCUs, $190 million to tribal colleges and more than $13 billion to Hispanic-serving institutions and Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-serving institutions.

Community colleges will be the main beneficiaries of another $225 million in relief funding targeted towards supporting public and non-profit institutions that have been left with the greatest unmet needs in the wake of the pandemic.

— Matt Zalaznick

FOOD INSECURITY

House Reps. press for help on food insecurity, SNAP benefits

Two members of the U.S. House of Representatives reached out to the Government Accountability Office asking that it assess the impact of food insecurity among college students and the barriers that may exist under the USDA’s Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).

Education and Labor Chair Bobby Scott (D-Va.) and Agriculture Committee Chair David Scott (D-Ga.) noted continuing concern over hunger among students that has been exacerbated by the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic—citing surveys that show as many as 40% of individuals at some campuses are not getting enough food.

Prior to the beginning of the national crisis, more than one million of the college students who were SNAP eligible did not reach out to attain benefits, according to the GAO’s own report in 2018. Many have struggled to under-
stand the complexities of the program, are unaware of it or simply don’t qualify.

Congress eased some of the restrictions of SNAP through the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act late last year, providing immediate access to benefits for those in work-study programs and those with expected family contributions of zero.

The two representatives are asking the GAO to look at further solutions—including extending those benefits for many who could become ineligible once the crisis lifts.

“Given that the U.S. Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics is likely to release new data on food insecurity among college students based on their 2020 National Post-Secondary Student Aid Study in early 2022 and that the Farm Bill is up for reauthorization in 2023, we feel the time is right to re-examine SNAP eligibility restrictions with respect to college students,” the Scotts wrote.

For college students, navigating SNAP can be daunting, especially for those from less-traditional situations (those living with families and then directly entering college for the first time). They must apply to specific states for consideration. For those whose hopes are high for finding information on the SNAP website, the answer to the first FAQ question “Am I eligible for SNAP?” might be a deal breaker: “Generally, students attending an institution of higher education more than half-time are not eligible for SNAP unless they meet an exemption.”

Recognizing the gravity of the food insecurity problem, many legislators over the past two years have tried to introduce bills to help. The most recent is the Student Food Security Act of 2021 proposed by Sen. Elizabeth Warren and others that hopes to make the Consolidated Appropriations Act guidelines permanent and provide further benefits for students, including: increasing low-income student eligibility to include those who are in federal or state work study programs, have an EFC of zero, can get maximum Pell Grant, or are a students whose households might not qualify but they would because they live independently. It also would require the Department of Education to both reach out to students about potential eligibility when they file for financial aid and track data on food and housing insecurity.

Another bill called the Enhance Access to SNAP Act from California Rep. Jimmy Gomez would simply get rid of the precondition that students work to attain benefits. As long they meet other SNAP rules, they would be eligible. — Chris Burt

HISTORIC PROMOTION

Boston institute names first female president in more than 100 years

A private non-profit college in Boston appointed the first female president in its 113-year history, one who was instrumental in helping the institution overcome big challenges during the pandemic.

Dr. Aisha Francis will transition from her role as chief executive to the top position at Benjamin Franklin Institute of Technology, leading a small but rising school that is positioning itself as a leader in affordability, career and technical education and the green economy.

Under Francis’ guidance, BFIT managed to steer through the complexities of COVID-19, including the move to a hybrid model for this largely experiential institution that serves more than 50% of first-generation students and 99% who receive financial aid. Many of them had few virtual options when the pandemic began.

“Dr. Francis has a clear vision for BFIT as a dynamic higher education resource that connects students whose families were left behind during past economic boom times to strong career paths at the leading edges of the regional economy,” said Turahn Dorsey, the college’s recently appointed Board Chair. “The Board is confident that she has all of the experience, leadership and fundraising skill to transform BFIT into an institution that more effectively, more expeditiously and more affordably connects young people to the prosperous futures that they deserve.”

Francis, a graduate of Fisk University who received her Ph.D. from Vanderbilt University, has more than 20 years of experience in higher education and working with non-profits. Before arriving at BFIT, she was Managing Director of Development at Harvard Medical School and also was Director of Major Gifts and Donations for the John F. Kennedy Library Foundation in Boston.

She plans to utilize those collaborative skills to help BFIT build on Boston’s success in a look toward the future.

“BFIT has all of the elements in place to help our students succeed, and to play a role in the continued evolution of Greater Boston’s economy as we experience the fourth industrial revolution,” Francis said. “In particular, we are a leader in the cleantech industry and our graduates will continue to be a key part of that workforce.”

Part of BFIT’s mission will be to empower future leaders and continue to forge corporate partnerships that focus on social justice and equity. The Institute of Technology will do so on a new campus in the city’s Nubian Square (formerly Dudley Square) area of Roxbury. — Chris Burt
The new ‘bogeyman’

Amid a charged political climate, three top leaders discuss critical race theory’s role and misconceptions at colleges and universities.

By Chris Burt

Since the 1970s, critical race theory has floated around higher education as a framework of exploration, largely among legal scholars, educators and social activists, to address the persistence of systemic racism.

One of the great myths, for example, is that “colorblindness” can simply undo power structures that have existed for centuries. Experts say getting to true equity—overcoming institutional racism and acknowledging that longstanding privilege still exists—is daunting. The fight is only beginning, and yet it is already center stage.

Around half of U.S. states either have passed or proposed legislation aimed at intercepting inclusion initiatives or, more directly, critical race theory itself. Although much of the public outcry against CRT has been levied at K-12 schools, which don’t even teach it, higher ed has had its share of detractors, too, especially since the rise of the multigenerational, multiracial Black Lives Matter movement. Colleges are facing unprecedented scrutiny from conservative states and voices, including outspoken Manhattan Institute fellow Christopher Rufo and Cornell professor William Jacobson, who has launched the website CriticalRace.org for those worried about its “negative impact.”

Gary Peller, a professor of law at Georgetown University who has been at the forefront of the CRT movement, says those who are dismissing CRT or engaging in “disinformation campaigns” don’t fully understand its tenets. Two other higher ed experts who spoke with University Business say CRT has become the new “bogeyman” meant to scare individuals susceptible to misinterpretation.

“The reason we chose the name ‘critical’ is that we are critical of the superficial reality—sadly, ultimately—of traditional Civil Rights approaches in that they fail to dig deeper into how racial power might be exercised,” Peller says. “We critique the idea of colorblindness as the ideal of racial justice, which was adopted in the 1960s by mainstream America, the idea that being just means not looking at people in terms of race at all, but being colorblind. We think that’s impossible, but also a false way to experience the world because race has played a really important role in our identities and certainly White power.”

Peller and colleagues across the country are trying to showcase disparities that still exist—not engender guilt in anyone—but rather identify what is still causing gaps while finding solutions that lead to better outcomes for all individuals and the nation. “Our traditional ways of understanding race were inadequate and impoverished,” Peller says. “We need new ways. That’s scary for people. People are used to thinking, I’m not racist because I don’t think about people in terms of race. And now they’re being presented with critical race theory, an ominous sounding theory that says that thinking is wrong. It’s confusing. It’s anxiety-producing, but I think that history is on the side of change on this.”

Where it is being taught

According to Jacobson’s website, as many as 300 colleges and universities (and likely more) are addressing diversity, equity and inclusion in classrooms or trainings in some form, but far fewer are implementing specific curricula that identify critical race theory.

One that is facing it head on is the University of Houston Downtown, which has its own Center for Critical Race Studies. It constructs coursework in CRT and community-engagement studies in diverse literature history. Its 12 fellows are creating a variety of programming around marginalization and race, conducting research and working with partners to discuss DEI matters. UHD has its own Introduction to Critical Race Studies course as well as advanced courses that touch on the topic.

If it’s occurring from UHD to UCLA (which also has a renowned Critical
Robertson says. “Critical race theory has never actually to be accurate,” from mischaracterizing it because the goal was never actually to be accurate,” Robertson says. “Critical race theory has been used as a moniker, a placeholder for all diversity, equity and inclusion work, a bogeyman.”

In Texas, that bogeyman has become a high priority on Gov. Greg Abbott’s agenda (House Bill 3979). He has expressed his desire to abolish critical race theory from being taught, as have conservative leaders in other states, including Florida. And yet, colleges remain largely insulated from bans. “It hasn’t reached us because universities in part are supposed to be those unfettered places where we are allowed, even encouraged, to ask the most bombastic questions,” Robertson says. “There’s a reluctance to make its way into the university. But they did send a clear signal that they’re not happy with it. And if given the opportunity, they’d like to reshape education in Texas.”

Robertson noted the concern on his campus after state leaders seized on former president Donald Trump’s desire to end funding for CRT trainings for federal workers. “With a name like the Center for Critical Race Study, there was a moment when there was a discussion about, do we have to change our name? Is our existence against the law?” Robertson says. “Think about the intersection of academia and race. Although the state may have never intended it, they were taking a particular swing at people of color, at faculty of color, who are already the minority at their university and already doing the work on the margins of their field.”

A critical lens

Dr. Cleveland Hayes, Associate Dean for Academic Affairs at Indiana University School of Education at IUPUI, has been involved in the CRT movement for years in higher ed and is a former leader at the national Critical Race Studies in Education Association. Like Peller and Robertson, he says most of his courses attract graduate students. This summer he taught a course on critical race theory with only Ph.D. students.

Like Robertson, he says he is dismayed by those who use CRT to push other agendas.

“First of all, just admit that this is not about CRT,” he says. “They hide behind CRT because they don’t want equity and inclusion being taught in schools. That’s what it really is. Just own that. They know the language to use: indoctrination. Nobody is trying to indoctrinate your child to believe anything. I’m not trying to convince you. You can believe what you want to believe, as long as that belief system is not rooted in the oppression of others. When it becomes rooted in the oppression of others, then we have to have a conversation. And with critical race theory, what do you have to lose?”

However, inviting CRT conversations onto campuses in conservative states in a charged political atmosphere might be difficult for some university leaders.

“They have a really fine line to walk because of donors,” he says. “If you have a big donor that gives hundreds of millions of dollars and says if CRT is being taught on campus, I’m going to pull my funding, that’s a reality. When you have states like Indiana that are cutting funding to higher ed, it becomes a difficult situation. You want them to stand up, but they also need that funding.”

On the flip side, it doesn’t appear CRT is going anywhere.

“Critical race theory, in terms of higher education, is going be around for a while, because this is the deepest, most profound and sophisticated approach to issues of racial power that were treated entirely simplistically, prior to our arrival,” Peller says.
Three opinions: Is CRT worth the fight for higher ed leaders?

Cleveland Hayes, Indiana University School of Education at IUPUI:
“If we’re really committed to living up to all men—even that term is problematic—are created equal, then that must include men, women, trans men, trans women, indigenous, immigrants, Black and White individuals. It’s about valuing their lived experiences and developing curriculum and policy that make schooling better. This conversation around CRT is really about making the world a better place.”

Vida Robertson, University of Houston Downtown:
“Universities should employ race-conscious, deliberate, strategic and intentional assessments of the way that they do business in classrooms and in student affairs. In order to empower marginalized communities, in order for us to achieve the kind of equity that all students have the same opportunity to be successful, critical race theory is an essential part of that conversation. I would say to the detractors, we believe in fairness, we believe in equality. Critical race theory is one of those tools that will help us understand what that equality now looks like.”

Gary Peller, Georgetown University:
“University administrators have to be part of a broad piece of American culture that’s speaking and reassuring in competence-building ways about the need for change and how good the new world is going to be. If a new world looks like a world of cancel culture, where everybody’s surveilling everybody every minute, that’s scary and nobody wants it. That’s the task: to explain how it’s not going to be like that. And it’s hard because we don’t live in a new world here. We don’t have a blueprint for it.”
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International students have shown they are more determined than ever to get to the United States, and institutes of higher education are as passionate as they are about making that happen.

After a period that saw rare declines in enrollment of international students coming to the U.S., this year saw 43% more applications. That renewed optimism was fueled by several factors, including an improvement in the health crisis, additional in-person learning options and a more welcoming political environment.

“The reality is, over the past several years, it’s been a little complicated getting students to the United States,” Dr. Angel Perez, CEO of the National Association for College Admission Counseling, told a virtual audience at the 2021 Forum presented by the U.S. Department of State’s EducationUSA. “But the good news is visa issuance is returning to pre-pandemic level, and the Biden Administration is very supportive.”

Still, there is an uncomfortable uncertainty that persists for some of the 1.1 million international students who study here driven by the delta variant, travel issues and the thought of deferrals. So, college teams are having to get creative, being more supportive, adaptable, focused on building partnerships and connections virtually and accepting that this new normal isn’t completely normal.

“I think a big theme the whole year is being flexible,” says Bryan Gross, Vice President of Enrollment Management and Marketing at Western New England University, which boasts 300 students from 30 different countries.

Mirka Martel, Head of Research, Evaluation and Learning at the Institute of International Education, agrees. “We anticipate the recovery to come in phases, tied to vaccinations and travel guidelines,” she says.

That has institutions holding their collective breath. International students comprise more than 5% of all campus populations, contribute almost $40 billion to the economy, prop up enrollment numbers, boost campus diversity and support more than 400,000 jobs.

“International education is critical to the development of strong diplomacy, global affairs and technological and medical advancements,” Esther Brimmer, Executive Director and CEO of NAFSA: Association of International Educators, noted at the EducationUSA event. “Attracting international students and scholars is an important way for the United States to grow its knowledge economy. They drive research-theory classrooms.”

Creating opportunities

Meeting international students “where they are” and providing personal touches are common ideals shared by experts. Dr. Brian Whalen, Executive Director at the American International Recruitment Council (AIRC), stressed the importance of colleges following through on diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives, especially in assessments, while prioritizing internationalization of curriculum and research, mobility options and affordability. Through the toughest days of the pandemic, they did a remarkable job connecting with partners to perform outreach and assistance and provide steady guidance to international students.

“That was a signal to me that going forward we’re going to see a lot more partnerships and collaborations,” Whalen said. “Institutions need to understand why it’s critically important to integrate [DEI] into each segment of international
enrollment and to be able to employ a range of strategic approaches to achieve this. We can’t lose that momentum.”

Whelan also talked up the many unique pathways offered to those who come to study here. For example, Gross said Western New England’s pool of prospective international students includes those already studying in the U.S., at high schools, boarding schools and community colleges. Pre-college programs, too, give students a taste of the college experience, while affording institutions the chance to showcase their value.

“Students get to test-drive institutions they may be interested in applying to,” said Christine Parker, Executive Director of Summer Session at The University of Chicago. “If you provide a quality experience and you promote messages and invite people to talk about their experience with others, it’s surprising how powerful that can be.”

One of the most viable pipelines for students and colleges has been the 2+2 program. Community colleges were as nimble through the pandemic as four-year institutions in their outreach efforts.

“The real innovators used this time to look at new ways to reach students,” said Dr. Stephanie Kelly, Executive Director of Community Colleges for International Development. “They recruited faculty already involved in study abroad. They recruited staff and students with connections in other countries to be emissaries for higher education. Other members were leveraging their new virtual exchange programs. I encourage you to break down the silos between international student recruiting and curricular and co-curricular programs. While international student recruiting is a competitive field, there are many ways community colleges and universities actually provide a better service for students who want to study here and can work together.”

Recruitment strategies that work

Admissions and advising experts weighed in on important areas that college leaders should be considering as they try to reach students through the year.

• The personal touch: “Parents have been feeding back to me, it’s about personal relationships,” Gross says. “Anytime they called, people got back to them. You think about all the technology, all the fancy marketing and virtual events, but I think a big storyline for our success was doing what we’ve always done so well, which is connecting with people.”

• Staying connected: “Good old-fashioned email still works. Zoom. Interviews were really the best thing for us,” said Reon Sines-Sheaff, Director of International Admissions at the College of Wooster in Ohio. “Students wanted to connect one-one-one, so we had individual options to engage and connect on WhatsApp or WeChat. Make sure you have a topic besides your school. We’ve done case studies, essay workshops, [conversations on] sustainability and athletics. Those were the topics that got us in front of students.”

• Webinars and topics: “If students can Google it, they don’t want to hear about it in a webinar,” said Katherine Scodova, and EducationUSA Regional Education Advising Coordinator for Europe and Eurasia. “What they are looking for is insider information, how to stand out in the admissions process, how they stand out if you’re test-optional, how to create a portfolio.” Jess Strong, Recruitment Coordinator at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, stressed giving students information such as, “what life on campus might be like, financial aid, how they get involved. Students don’t necessarily need the nuts and bolts of the admissions process.” Scodova also highlighted the value of professors hosting mock classes, breadth across several social media channels and virtual fairs, which “were a great way to us to have more institutions participating than typically would come in person.”

• Visa delays: “Quite a few countries remain closed for visas or have slow visa appointment times,” Scodova said. “Students have been traveling to countries to get visas. This has been hard because of

SNAPSHOT OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

The COVID Snapshot Survey Series done by the Institute of International Education (IIE) throughout the 2020-21 academic year provides a look back and a look ahead to the outreach done by more than 400 institutions:

86% Colleges and universities that planned for some form of in-person study in fall 2021. None were planning for fully online.

43% The increase in international student applications for the 2021-22 academic year.

73% Marketing and outreach staff that focused on online recruitment this year, which ranked ahead of “working with students on other campuses” (68%) and social media (65%).

50% Increase expected in study abroad. Last year, because of the pandemic, almost all institutions projected declines.

64% Institutions that planned to offer vaccines to students for 2021-22.

UniversityBusiness.com
various travel restrictions due to COVID. Those that didn’t get their I-20s right away were struggling to get appointments in July and August. Trying to figure out ways to support them is helpful. They want to come to campus. They want to be engaged. So, to be stuck at this point is heartbreaking. For students trying to come in January, urge them to get a visa appointment as soon as possible.”

• **Test-optional:** Scodova recommended that institutions that are test-optional promote that. Many students and families remain confused about the value of testing, and high achievers want to submit scores but often must travel long distances to reach a test center.

• **Get in front of parents:** Most experts recommend this, especially with the pandemic still lingering. Parents want to know that their children are safe and being given the best opportunities to succeed. Their feedback also can be very powerful. Sally Conover, Director of the International Education Center at Diablo Valley College in Concord, Calif., said of the pre-college program experience, “They’re key in marketing, because what’s better than to have a happy mother or father talking about their program that their son or daughter just went on, and helping to spread the word?”

While 2021-22 may be as unique as the previous academic year, there are countless considerations. But college reps must remain steadfast and positive.

“With declining demographics, change in consumer mindset, unsustainable tuition discounting practices and the rhetoric around struggles in higher ed, a lot of institutions have jumped on the international recruitment market,” he said. “They’re doing it because they’re hoping to diversity their portfolio. No matter what, you’ve got to be in it for the right reasons. International students provide such richness. They benefit our domestic student experience. They benefit our faculty. It’s powerful for our brand and powerful for the students.”

Chris Burt is UB’s associate editor.
LAST WORD

University library survey: What you don’t know might hurt you

A nationwide survey of students reveals what they want in library design and what they use it for most

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hen it comes to the use of academic libraries, it is imperative for stakeholders to understand how and why students use that space and what their expectations are. That means considering and studying student preferences and behaviors to gather that knowledge and using that data to create more meaningful and satisfying library experiences.

Ask Your Target Market, an independent online research firm, collected input from 500 students from across the country over a two-week period in October 2020. The purpose of the research was to understand students’ preferences, behaviors, emotions and experiences when spending time in their college or university libraries. All students were above the age of 18, attended a four-year university, and were regular users of the library (minimum of two hours per week). Current first-year students were excluded from the survey as they did not have in-person library experience. Information collected on students’ perceptions and behaviors was for pre-COVID-19 library use and not current library use during the pandemic.

Research findings
The number-one reason why students visited the library was to study alone (selected by 55% of students), followed by studying with friends (42.2%). Most students (58.6%) preferred quiet study spaces in the library. The top five areas where students spent their time in the library were: quiet study space (58.6%), computer lab (37.8%), reading room (35%), café (33.8%), and group study space (32.2%).

Students were asked what physical change the library could make to encourage them to use it more frequently. The responses included: more comfortable seating and more places to relax, more individual rooms or independent workspaces, and collaborative space rooms. Students may perceive the “formal” design of older or not recently renovated libraries as less welcoming and relaxing. In fact, students wrote in suggestions such as, “make the furniture a little more modern,” “make it more open, instead of too formal,” and create a “more home-like feeling.” The challenge is incorporating these diverse kinds of areas in libraries not designed for these accommodations and those facing budget constraints with any kind of a renovation project.

Recommendations
Students expect their libraries to have a variety of study spaces, including quiet places to study alone, spaces to be able to study alone together, and collaboration areas where they can participate in group activities. They also require space to accommodate distance learning or viewing online lectures. Incorporating a diversity of spaces in the library allows students to see that the space is “theirs.” These needs may vary depending on any number of criteria including the culture and focus of the college or university, the location of the school, and the patrons of each library. To make the best use of the space, determine what students require in these spaces, such as flexible and moveable furniture, multidimensional lighting, and additional power and data outlets.

Today’s students want to see and be seen in a space where they feel welcome, comfortable and inspired. Rethink the traditional big, fixed, and, in some instances, intimidating circulation desk and instead establish an experiential sequence so students immediately feel they want to be drawn into the library when they take their first steps inside.

Another recommendation is to consider the functionality of the library and overlay it onto the students’ emotional needs in the space. For example, a formal study room with a row of 100 chairs at a table may be functional but may not be the most successful or engaging setting for most students to study. Instead, the study results support designing relaxed, comfortable and calm study spaces. This is accomplished by using innovative furniture solutions to create the environments desired by students.

As students’ requirements and expectations change, the library needs to adapt. It is important to be stewards of understanding what students seek in their academic library and design appropriate solutions that create those environments. This means instead of just designing library space based on what’s trendy, it is essential to make data-driven decisions based on students’ input and desires.

Today’s students are dealing with unprecedented stressors affecting their academic careers. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, their college experience existed mostly online in 2020. As a result, they are seeking empathic connections—some of which can be fulfilled by their library experiences. By providing spaces where students can choose whether to be in areas with other students and where they feel relaxed, welcome and comfortable, libraries offer the human connection vital to a student’s academic success.

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