



# Common Challenges, Uncommon Results: Ten Recommendations for Enhancing Student Support and Improving Staff Engagement

An analysis of findings from  
InsideTrack Needs Assessments

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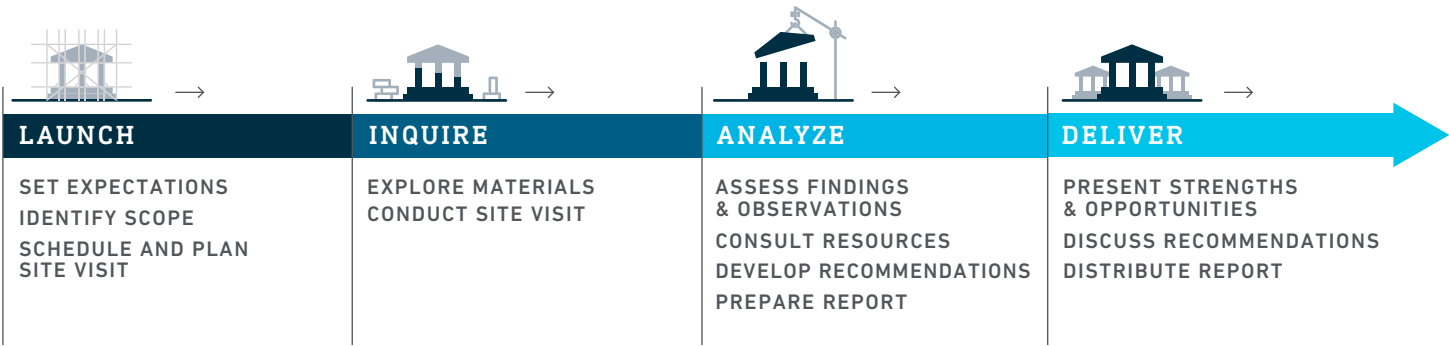
# Introduction

On any given day, student support teams in higher education can be bogged down with too many walk-in appointments — or find themselves hoarse from leaving too many unanswered voicemails. They can get mired in the complexities of learning a new technology platform or run out of paper jotting handwritten notes after every interaction. They can send out the same information a student's already received from three other departments, or discover a student who's been absent for several terms and was never contacted at all.

Each of these situations may seem like opposite extremes of the student support spectrum. Yet they all speak to common issues that can affect any student-facing program at any type of institution. Every challenge faced by a student support program gets tangled up in the complex context of an institution's history, processes and strategic aims. But despite the nuances, the same issues surface time and time again in all institutions striving to achieve the core goals of student success: improve retention and increase graduation rates while closing achievement gaps and preparing students for career success.

Since 2001, InsideTrack has partnered with institutions across the U.S. to assess their approach to student support and chart a course from their current state to their desired outcomes. Our student-centered assessment methodology involves focus groups and conversations with students, staff and administrators; observations of student success teams in action; and reviews of communications and other materials. With student success as the lodestar guiding each program assessment, these analyses equip institutions to identify and address the most pressing challenges they face in improving student outcomes and staff performance.

## Assessment Methodology



The following paper synthesizes findings from the assessments we've conducted at 40 institutions over the past five years. From our analysis we present the ten most common challenges we've identified and our recommendations for addressing them. The findings are organized into three areas of focus — Student Support Methodology, Professional and Organizational Development, and Technology — and encompass all types of institutions, including two- and four-year colleges, adult and professional programs and for-profit institutions. Next to each challenge we list the percentage of assessments that uncovered that particular issue.

# COMMON CHALLENGES, UNCOMMON RESULTS

# NEEDS ASSESSMENTS

## ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS



Synthesizes  
**5 YEARS**

of findings from InsideTrack  
Needs Assessments



Compiles reports on  
**40 INSTITUTIONS**

across all institution and  
student types



Presenting  
**10 MOST**

common challenges, and  
our recommendations for  
addressing them

## Ten Most Common Student Support Challenges



### Student Support Methodology

Inconsistent approach to  
student support

Transactional approach to  
student support

One-size-fits-all  
approach

Students who need support  
the most aren't receiving it



### Professional & Organizational Development

Lack of clear staff  
objectives

Limited professional  
development opportunities

Lack of coordination among  
student-facing departments

Change fatigue



### Technology

Difficulty connecting with  
students

Staff are not fully utilizing  
technology capabilities



# Student Support Methodology: Proactive and Persistent Support

**CHALLENGE:** Inconsistent approach to student support

**RECOMMENDATION:** Adopt a shared student support methodology

A dedicated student support team brings together staff who have extensive individual expertise in their role. That sounds like a win-win. However, when staff are left to go their own way — instead of receiving training in a shared student support methodology — the variation of approaches and styles can create an inconsistent experience for students. The cacophony is amplified at institutions where faculty and other departments outside student services are also involved in student support.

**45%**  
of total  
assessments

Working in an environment where everyone takes responsibility for student success is a good problem to have. But to make a measurable impact on student outcomes, and to empower staff to make progress toward shared goals, all support functions should be aligned around a single methodology that offers a shared language of student success across departments. The most useful methodologies are those that can be applied to a variety of student situations, such as those emphasizing the development of noncognitive or social-emotional skills. These methodologies help students build skills that cut across different academic disciplines, career and life situations, cultivating students' long-term success.



When Northeast Wisconsin Technical College trained its entire student-facing team — from admissions to financial aid to faculty — in the same coaching-based methodology, they were able to enhance the support students received at every stage of their journey. John Grant, NWTC's Dean of Student Development, recalled that before aligning everyone on a shared methodology, the program boasted a collaborative and well-respected team. "But what we didn't have a lot of was consistency," he said. "We needed an opportunity to come together and rally around one effort." After the team was trained on a shared methodology, Grant said, they realized that "working with students in the same way" creates a more "seamless" experience for students and helps them make the most of all available support resources.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> NWTC staff share their perspectives on the ways that coaching-based training has impacted their approach to student support. See: InsideTrack (2018). "My coaching light came on." Retrieved from InsideTrack Web Site: <https://www.insidetrack.com/resources/my-coaching-light-came-on/>.



**CHALLENGE: Transactional approach to student support****RECOMMENDATION: Adopt a developmental support approach**

A transactional model may seem more efficient and, on the surface, student-oriented. Yet students and institutions both benefit from an approach that focuses on developing long-term success skills — and not simply completing short-term tasks like registration and enrollment. We know there can be good reason for support programs to focus on students' transactional requests. For instance, sheer volume can make it seem like there's little time for retention or relationship-building, especially when those outcomes can be more difficult to track. But even adding a few new questions and phrases into student meetings — asking more “whys,” for instance — can encourage students to develop qualities like self-awareness and self-confidence.

A developmental coaching approach can cultivate students' long-term skills in a way that ultimately improves retention and graduation. In addition, moving away from a transactional approach can help staff connect with the institution's educational mission, make time for meaningful interactions even during hectic points in the term, and empower students to take the lead in their own education.

**65%**  
of total  
assessments



After the Austin Community College advising team adopted a developmental coaching model, student meetings about things like enrollment and transfer applications started branching off into other topics that had a surprising impact on persistence and completion. In the words of one ACC advisor, “It’s kind of easy sometimes to say to a student, ‘oh, you want to take that class next semester? Okay, here you go! Thank you! Have a good day!’”<sup>2</sup> With a developmental approach, she said, she can now “ask the questions that the students themselves may not have really thought about sharing. Sometimes that will change the whole direction of what the student planned to talk about. Many students have voiced their appreciation and told me, ‘I’m so glad I came in here today.’”

**CHALLENGE: One-size-fits-all approach****RECOMMENDATION: Provide personalized support at scale**

Adopting a unified student support approach shouldn't mean that every student is treated uniformly. Using common methodology as a starting point, teams still need to develop a set of tactics and strategies that can adapt to the needs of specific student populations. While the central tenets of social-emotional skill development may remain the same, tailoring details like messaging, delivery and timing of interactions can enable teams to provide personalized support at scale. This ensures that staff time doesn't go to waste, and that the resources institutions have invested in are put to good use.

Trying different communication strategies helps institutions phase in fixes to accommodate different student preferences. For instance, advisors who send information packets via snail mail to busy working adults or Generation Z students could have much better luck texting links to online resources. Digital support isn't just convenient — it's also trackable. Institutions can test different engagement methods and pinpoint optimal strategies for different populations.

**15%**  
of total  
assessments



Developing subject matter expertise for specific student populations can also be an effective way to personalize support. Originally established to meet the specific needs of military students at El Toro Marine Corps Air Station, Brandman University continues to support active-duty military and veteran students at six military bases and online. In order to best serve this student population, Brandman provides military-specific coaches who support students as they transition from the culture of the military to academia and the civilian workforce.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> For the complete interview with this ACC advisor, see: InsideTrack (2017). “What you learn about a student’s academic future when you ask what goes on outside the classroom.” Retrieved from InsideTrack Web Site:

<https://www.insidetrack.com/resources/learn-students-academic-future-ask-goes-outside-classroom/>

<sup>3</sup> Brandman’s support for military students is part of a larger commitment to enhancing student success and developing institutional change management capabilities. See: InsideTrack (2018). “Coaching, Capacity Building and Innovation at Brandman University.” Retrieved from InsideTrack Web Site:

<https://www.insidetrack.com/resources/coaching-capacity-building-innovation-brandman-university/>

**CHALLENGE: Students who need the most support aren't receiving it****RECOMMENDATION: Develop strategies for proactive student outreach**

Developmental support is designed to enhance every student's educational journey, not just those who struggle or are "at risk." Yet we know that too few students take the initiative to reach out. If things are going well, they may not feel there's a need; if things aren't going well, shame, stigma and feeling overwhelmed can make them hesitant to reach out.

Lack of awareness can also lead to underutilization of student support. For instance, programs serving adults may need to lead students to support because, after a long absence from educational environments, they're likely unaware of the range of services institutions now offer. The same may be true of programs serving large populations of first-generation students, who may still be in the early stages of familiarizing themselves with higher education resources.

Adopting a proactive outreach strategy can help students build relationships with staff before problems arise. Just as importantly, proactive outreach reaffirms that student support is for all students, not just those who are deemed "at risk."

An advising relationship with deep roots can surface issues and challenges that may otherwise go unnoticed, and can make students aware of other services and opportunities on campus. The first step to implementing proactive outreach is ensuring that there is updated contact information for all students on file. The next step is developing a structured communication outreach plan that lays the foundation for a trusting relationship before crises arise, removes the stigma from seeking support and makes meeting with an advisor or other support staff a normal part of the student experience.

**28%**  
of total  
assessments



In a 2014 article on the benefits of proactive student support — also known as "intrusive advising" — for specific populations, authors Beth Giroir and Jeremy Schwehm describe key strategies employed in proactive outreach. These include ensuring that advisors "make the first move" when connecting with students, demonstrate knowledge about the institution and available resources and understand outside-of-school factors that could impact student success. Giroir and Schwehm note, "The primary goal is for the advisor to form a relationship with each advisee, thus building a continuous dialogue between the advisor and the advisee so potential situations can be handled with ease."<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Giroir, B. & Schwehm, J. (2014). Implementing intrusive advising principles for adult learners in online programs. Retrieved from NACADA Clearinghouse Resource Web Site: <http://nacada.ksu.edu/tabid/3318/articleType/ArticleView/articleId/3033/article.aspx>



# Professional & Organizational Development: Nurturing Staff Capabilities

**CHALLENGE:** Lack of clear staff objectives

**RECOMMENDATION:** Set performance expectations based on institutional objectives

**28%**  
of total  
assessments

Student support professionals perform best when they understand the connection between their own performance metrics and the institution's student success objectives. But in many cases, frontline staff do not have insight into program targets, such as enrollment or retention goals. Performance expectations can therefore feel arbitrary, or the stakes may feel low if they do not understand the connection between their role and the institution's mission.

For instance, tracking performance metrics like number of phone calls or emails can be important, but unless the connection to student outcomes is made clear, staff engagement may lag. When this happens, institutions are at risk for employee turnover, which costs time and money (replacing an employee can cost up to a third of that role's annual salary, according to one study) and weakens the support students receive.<sup>5</sup>

It's critical to take into account which objectives and metrics are most important to the institution's goals when establishing key evaluation frameworks. For instance, performance measures that align with student success objectives might take the form of things like registration rates and term-to-term retention. Always measure what matters most.



At every institution, student support staff objectives should connect with student outcomes. An article on the role of student affairs in learning outcomes assessment published by the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) urges student affairs professionals to "connect your work as much as possible to the overall general learning principles and goals of your institution."<sup>6</sup> Writing in an AAC&U publication, Lynn C. Freeman describes the advising model for her own institution, which maps advising practices to students' intellectual and academic growth and career preparation.<sup>7</sup> Grounding staff expectations in the central mission of the institution ensures that student support staff can always connect to the "why" of their roles, and that an institution's core values are emphasized and reaffirmed in every student interaction.

<sup>5</sup> Bolden-Barrett, V. (2017). "Study: Turnover costs employers \$15,000 per worker." HR Dive. Retrieved from: <https://www.hrdive.com/news/study-turnover-costs-employers-15000-per-worker/449142/>

<sup>6</sup> Bresciani, M. J. (2011, August). "Making assessment meaningful: What new student affairs professionals and those new to assessment need to know (NILOA Assessment Brief: Student Affairs)." Urbana, IL: University for Illinois and Indiana University, National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment. Retrieved from NILOA Web Site: <http://www.learningoutcomeassessment.org/documents/ABStudentAffairs.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Freeman, Lynn C. (2008, Winter.) "Establishing Effective Advising Practices to Influence Student Learning and Success." Retrieved from AAC&U Web Site: <https://www.aacu.org/publications-research/periodicals/establishing-effective-advising-practices-influence-student>



## CHALLENGE: Limited professional development opportunities

### RECOMMENDATION: Develop training and quality assurance plans

**53%**  
of total  
assessments

The risks of not providing sufficient professional development opportunities start with a disengaged staff, and can quickly snowball to threaten student and institutional outcomes. Staff who are dissatisfied aren't likely to stick around — in one study, 94 percent of employees said that they would stay with their employer longer if they had access to career development opportunities.<sup>8</sup> Of the staff who do remain, many may not have the training and skills to make a measurable impact on student outcomes.

A robust professional development program takes more than a few one-off workshops. It should be a coordinated effort that maps out a staff member's career trajectory at the institution.

We recommend that institutions start advancing their professional development program by identifying key skills and competencies required for effective employee performance, and build up mastery through levels of training. Once staff master the basics of a support methodology, an established professional development path can propel them toward more advanced qualifications, or specialization in specific topics. Special training for managers can ensure staff receive the support they need, and that managers are skilled in providing constructive, transparent feedback. Going forward, quality assurance and observations will provide opportunity for mentorship and staff development, and also ensure consistency and cohesion of the support team.

Creating and promoting professional development opportunities can also help realign teams that have experienced staff attrition. Among close-knit support teams, turnover or leadership change can create insecurity and anxiety among remaining staff. When longtime team members leave, they take their experience and expertise with them. As new staff are added to replenish the team, a comprehensive onboarding process can train everyone in the same objectives and methodology, ensuring that departments effectively and efficiently regain productivity.



When Old Dominion University integrated a new coaching approach to more meaningfully engage with prospective online students, the program provided quality assurance and professional development to help staff adopt new practices. Staff satisfaction and engagement increased along with enrollment rates. "One student was so appreciative of my assistance and support that she sent an email to the associate vice president for Distance Learning in order to recognize the 'quality of advisory skills and services' that she had received," said Liza King, enrollment and operations coordinator.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Lefkowitz, R. (2018). Workplace Learning Report. Available at <https://learning.linkedin.com/content/dam/me/learning/en-us/pdfs/linkedin-learning-workplace-learning-report-2018.pdf>.

<sup>9</sup> To learn more about these and other efforts at Old Dominion University to enhance student success and staff capabilities, see: InsideTrack (2018). "Increased retention, improved ROI: Coaching and Capacity Building at Old Dominion University." Retrieved from InsideTrack Web Site: <https://www.insidetrack.com/resources/increased-retention-improved-roi-coaching-and-capacity-building-at-old-dominion-university/>



## CHALLENGE: Lack of coordination among student-facing departments

### RECOMMENDATION: Create a journey map with support touchpoints

As programs evolve and staff take on new responsibilities, overlaps and inefficiencies can arise. With every student-facing department focused on their own responsibilities and objectives, understanding the functions of other teams can fall by the wayside. In these cases, outreach can be so inconsistent that sometimes a student will be contacted multiple times in one day by different departments — or experience an absence of support during critical milestones.

When staff don't know who is responsible for what, students don't know either. The fallout from this confusion means that students might fall through the cracks, or (at the other extreme) that duplicative efforts will drain department resources. Institutions can address this ambiguity by doing a communication audit to see every point of active outreach across all student-facing departments. Based on findings, institutions can create a student journey map to show when students are interacting with which services. Mapping the student journey can also help student support teams determine where there are gaps in service, and whether any services or outreach need to be restructured or updated.

**58%**  
of total  
assessments



Based on findings from an InsideTrack Needs Assessment, the University of Central Florida mapped out its student support pathway to better understand the online student experience. The institution found that students had multiple entry points into the university and could benefit from receiving support and resources sooner. Clarifying the student journey became one of UCF's initial steps in building a new student support program that enhanced the student experience.<sup>10</sup>

## CHALLENGE: Change fatigue

### RECOMMENDATION: Adopt change management framework

Whether rolling out new programs to attract students, adopting new procedures to conform to state and federal policies, or trying a new approach to boost retention and graduation, institutions across all education sectors may be struggling to keep up with new initiatives. While all of these initiatives are intended to strengthen student and institutional success, juggling too many can leave staff unable to balance competing priorities.

Institutions that carefully roll out new initiatives with a detailed project management strategy may be surprised when changes are unsuccessful or short-lived. That's because project management is only one-half of the initiative equation. A consistent change management strategy, such as those from Kotter or Prosci®, can increase the chance that new initiatives will take root by equipping staff with the skills and motivation to see a new initiative through. With a consistent change management strategy in place, staff can join together to focus on institutional objectives, and institutions can make better progress on key priority areas.

**58%**  
of total  
assessments



According to data from a Prosci report published in 2016, *Best Practices in Change Management*, change initiatives in educational settings benefit from broad support across the institution, including faculty and administrators. The same report cited a number of issues common to the academic area that prompt institutions to launch new initiatives, such as competition in the market, consolidation, budget pressures, changes in government regulations, and shifting student demographics.<sup>11</sup> Best practices for change management in student support programs include making staff aware of the change and the reasons behind it; building staff skills to successfully execute the change; and maintaining highly visible executive sponsorship.

<sup>10</sup> Leaders from the University of Central Florida discuss the journey map and other student-centered institutional efforts in a 2018 webinar. See: InsideTrack. (2018). "Want to enhance student outcomes? Here's how one institution did it." Retrieved from InsideTrack Web Site: <https://www.insidetrack.com/resources/want-to-enhance-student-outcomes-heres-how-one-institution-did-it/>

<sup>11</sup> Creasey, T. and Stise, R. (2016). *Best Practices in Change Management*. Prosci Inc.



# Technology: Enhancing Student- and Staff-Facing Functions

**CHALLENGE:** Difficulty connecting with students

**RECOMMENDATION:** Adopt multichannel student support approach

Higher education has benefited in many ways from society's digital transformation. Instruction has expanded to the digital classroom; students register for classes and take care of other tasks online; and ebooks and other resources have replaced the twenty-pound textbooks of yore. So why are so many institutions still relying on face-to-face meetings as the gold standard of student support? Some may feel that in-person interactions are best for relationship-building; others may assume that technology-enabled communication is too complicated and expensive.

In fact, the opposite is true. Relying exclusively on face-to-face student support can strain staff time and resources. It can also hinder relationship-building between students and staff, because insisting on in-person meetings can limit the availability of support for students who need it the most. Offering students multichannel options for support communications — and tracking student communication preferences — broadens access to critical resources and can actually increase engagement between students and support staff. Rather than replacing the traditional one-on-one appointment, it creates significantly more opportunity for connection via text, phone and other modes.

**35%**  
of total  
assessments



When coaches at one institution began using texting for student communications, they were more than three times as successful at engaging with difficult-to-reach students.<sup>12</sup> In addition to being more convenient and accessible, multichannel student support also allows students to share personal experiences through the medium that's most comfortable for them. In the following text exchange excerpt, a student and coach delve into the outside-of-school issues impacting the student's academic progress.

**Coach**

Can you share a bit more about the challenges you are facing outside of school?

**Student**

Well only one person is working in my house and it's two adults and 6 pets because one died. And all of the bills are just racking up. We just got WiFi turned back on so we can do homework (we are both online students) but luckily it was only off for one day! But rent and water are behind so trying to catch up just isn't going well.

So sorry about your pet. That's a lot. And financial predicaments can be really stressful. Thanks for providing more context.

<sup>12</sup> A multichannel approach is also associated with more frequent coaching meetings. See: InsideTrack. (2017). "Engagement equals success." Retrieved from InsideTrack Web Site: <https://www.insidetrack.com/resources/engagement-equals-success/>

## CHALLENGE: Staff are not fully utilizing technology capabilities

### RECOMMENDATION: Leverage your platform to better support staff

When an institution has made an investment in a particular student support platform, it's crucial to ensure that all staff and departments use it consistently. Training and onboarding need to accompany any tech adoption to make sure it is used optimally and the institution gets a strong return on investment.

Often, staff are only scratching the surface of their platform's function. But once they see the many ways it can enhance their own roles, they will maximize its value. For example, using a platform for roster management can enable staff to more easily track student interactions and identify students in need of further outreach. Data analytics capabilities can easily surface widespread trends and pain points, providing real-time insights on student engagement.

As today's students come to expect more from their institution's services and resources, every interaction has to count. Integrate technology into your program in a way that maximizes your staff's talents and time, and empowers them to more meaningfully engage with greater numbers of students.

**18%**  
of total  
assessments



In addition to helping staff work more efficiently and productively, incorporating a technology platform into student support enables institutions to serve more students and still save the bottom line. When Penn State University World Campus incorporated a technology-enabled approach into their personalized coaching program — combining personal interactions with digital resources — the program saw increased yield and first-year retention, and was able to serve about four times as many students at a similar cost.<sup>13</sup>



<sup>13</sup> InsideTrack. (2018). "Penn State University World Campus + InsideTrack Strong Start Coaching." Retrieved from InsideTrack Web Site: <https://www.insidetrack.com/resources/penn-state-university-world-campus-insidetrack-strong-start-coaching/>



## Conclusion: A Framework to Support the Teams Dedicated to Supporting Students

At every institution where we conducted an assessment, we found dedicated student support professionals at every level committed to student success. We also found institutional leaders intent on improving the experience of their students and staff, and providing the best educational experience possible. We aim to support those who support students by developing the right strategies that help the entire institutional community thrive.

Knee-deep in the frustrations of processes and systems, it can be difficult for student-facing teams to identify the core challenges undermining their essential functions, let alone find solutions to address them. Since 2001, we've seen these challenges manifest in a variety of ways, from ineffective student communications to insufficient staff trainings to inefficient systems and technology. Drawing on a meta-analysis of program assessments from 40 institutions, this paper illuminates the ten most common student support challenges we've uncovered and provides actionable recommendations. Our hope in offering these challenges and recommendations is not only to share the insights and best practices we've developed in working with our institutional partners, but also to provide a structural framework so student support teams can objectively address the obstacles they encounter in fulfilling their roles.

The core issues these challenges and recommendations address are common across all institution types, including two- and four-year institutions and adult and professional programs. While the causes of these issues, and the practical applications of their solutions, can vary greatly among institutions, the sense of urgency for addressing them shouldn't waver.

As issues multiply and objectives go unmet, support teams can lose sight altogether of how the difficulties they're experiencing today can impact a student's entire future. These challenges can also impact an institution's health and stability. But enhancing student support programs can improve staff engagement as well as student outcomes. When staff performance is increased and turnover is reduced, institutions maximize the value of their investments in people, processes and technology. A stronger and more sustainable support program makes a measurable impact on enrollment, graduation and retention — generating more resources for the institution to put back in its educational mission.



## One goal. Infinite impact.



InsideTrack is passionate about student success. Since 2001, we have been dedicated to partnering with colleges and universities to create adaptive student success solutions that generate measurable results. These solutions combine student coaching, staff training, technology and data analytics to increase enrollment, completion, and career readiness. Our coaching methodologies and uCoach® Platform optimize student engagement and generate valuable insights on the student experience.

InsideTrack research provides institutional decision-makers and higher education leaders with evidence-based insights on how to measurably increase student success. We investigate the trends, practices and challenges shaping today's higher education landscape and generate new findings regarding the student experience and student support. Our data, which draws on proprietary analytics, surveys and qualitative assessment, is firmly rooted in our direct experience supporting millions of students and thousands of programs. With student and institutional outcomes at the heart of every inquiry, InsideTrack Research equips educators with the knowledge needed to advance toward, and advocate for, effective and innovative approaches to student support.

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