

HOW TO

Onboard Community College Students

for Long-Term Success

LIAISON



Table of Contents

3	Introduction | The Importance of Effective Onboarding
6	Understanding the Student Experience
8	Building a Student-Centered Enrollment Journey
11	Leveraging Technology in Onboarding
13	Supporting Long-Term Student Success
15	Evaluating Onboarding Strategies
16	Conclusion | Creating a Holistic Onboarding Experience

INTRODUCTION

The Importance of Effective Onboarding

Community colleges serve as gateways to education for diverse populations, offering opportunities for students from various backgrounds to achieve their academic and professional goals. However, a critical component of this journey—onboarding—is often underemphasized.

Defining Onboarding: A Holistic Approach to Student Success

Unlike orientation, which is a short-term introduction to the college, onboarding is a comprehensive, sustained process that supports students from their initial interest in enrollment through matriculation and beyond. Effective onboarding covers multiple touchpoints throughout the student lifecycle, addressing unique individual needs while also delivering key information applicable to all students. This process is critical for fostering student retention, ensuring goal completion, and promoting overall success.

Onboarding spans several stages, including:



Pre-enrollment communication | Providing prospective students with essential information and resources to facilitate their decision-making process.



Application and admissions assistance | Supporting students through the application process, helping them complete all requirements smoothly.



Financial aid and payment support | Offering guidance on financial aid applications, scholarships, and payment plans.



Placement and assessment | Helping students navigate testing and placement so they are prepared for the right courses.



Academic advising and planning | Assisting students in creating personalized academic plans aligned with their goals.

Course registration | Ensuring students can register for classes with confidence and clarity.

Technical and digital literacy support | Familiarizing students with key digital tools like learning management systems (LMS) and student portals.

Student success programs | Introducing first-year experiences, mentorship opportunities, and tutoring services.

Campus integration | Encouraging connection through activities, events, and resources that make the campus feel like home.

Support services | Highlighting counseling, disability accommodations, veteran services, childcare, and other critical resources.

Community building | Encouraging engagement through clubs, organizations, and peer groups.

Early academic engagement | Promoting participation in academic programs and activities before classes begin.

Ongoing check-ins and feedback mechanisms | Maintaining communication to address challenges and gather input for continuous improvement.

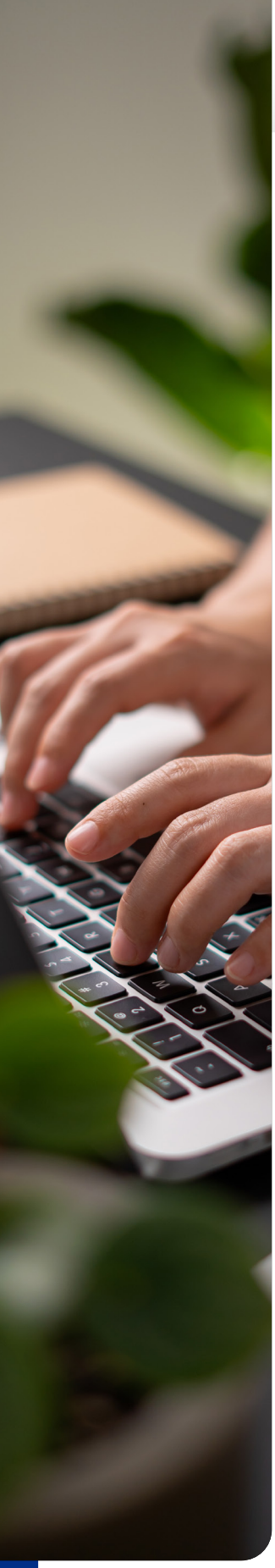
By intentionally addressing each of these areas, colleges can create a seamless and supportive onboarding process that empowers students from day one.

Why Onboarding Matters

For community colleges, onboarding is about more than just getting students through the door—it's about guiding them toward long-term achievement. By establishing a clear and supportive pathway, colleges can ensure students not only enroll but persist. This is particularly vital in institutions with a high proportion of first-generation students or adult learners who may face unique challenges.

Through strategic onboarding, colleges can address key barriers such as unclear procedures, lack of engagement, and limited knowledge of resources. This approach also creates an environment where students feel bolstered, involved, and motivated to succeed.





Challenges in Community Colleges

Community colleges often operate with smaller staff and cater to a wide array of groups, each with varying needs and expectations. Adult learners, for example, may juggle family responsibilities and full-time jobs, while others might need additional academic assistance due to educational gaps from years away from the classroom. **These challenges require a tailored approach that acknowledges these realities while delivering actionable solutions.**

In addition, the administrative load on a community college's staff can make effective onboarding seem daunting. With limited resources, institutions must find ways to streamline processes without sacrificing the quality of student support. This is where technology can play a transformative role, offering solutions like automated communications, centralized systems for tracking student progress, and digital tools that simplify complex workflows.

However, some institutions hesitate to implement these processes out of concern for creating additional barriers. There is a fear that requiring steps like mandatory advising or pre-enrollment tasks could contradict the open enrollment mindset, potentially discouraging students from pursuing their education. To address this, colleges must strike a balance—leveraging technology and streamlined processes to enhance support without adding unnecessary hurdles. The goal is to create a pathway that feels supportive and accessible, reinforcing the institution's commitment to student success while respecting the diverse needs of its population.

The Role of Technology

Technology is a powerful ally in reducing administrative burdens and optimizing the onboarding experience. **By leveraging tools such as customer relationship management (CRM) platforms and data-driven insights, colleges can enhance communication, tailor services, and better support students at every stage.** Technology alleviates staff workload while also verifying that processes are efficient, scalable, and student-centered.

With those opportunities and priorities in mind, this guide will provide actionable strategies and practical insights for community colleges to develop seamless and impactful experiences that drive student success.

Understanding the Student Experience

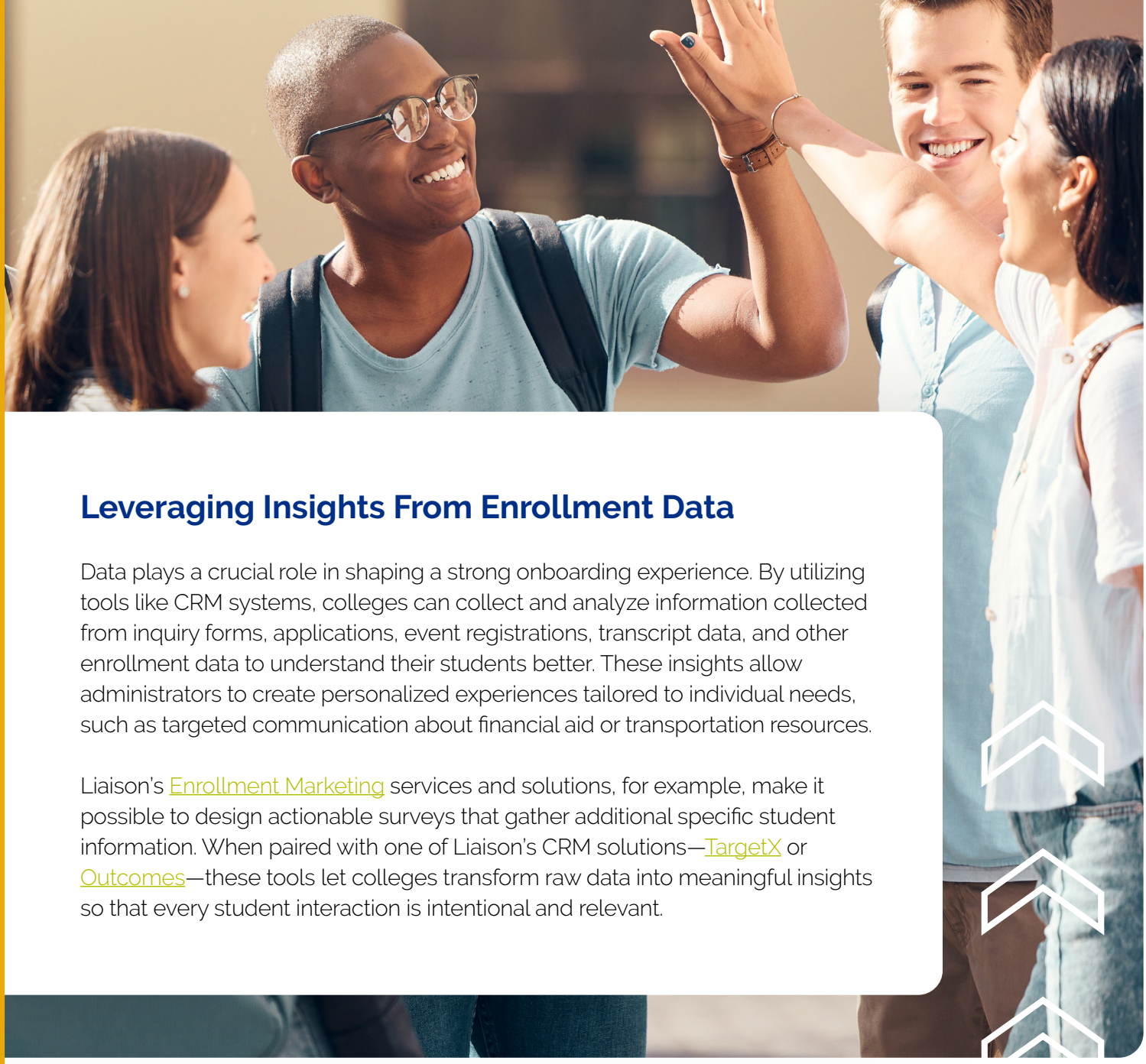
For community colleges, understanding the unique needs and challenges of their student population is a cornerstone of good onboarding. The student body at these institutions is often a rich tapestry of diversity, encompassing adult learners, those balancing education with work and family responsibilities, first-generation students, transfer-focused individuals, honors program participants, students pursuing direct-to-career pathways, cost-conscious learners, dual-enrolled high school students, and those with disabilities. Acknowledging and addressing their unique needs early in the enrollment process can make the difference between a student persisting toward their goals or dropping out.



Centering the Student

The path to academic achievement often begins with recognizing the specific situation of each student. These may include childcare responsibilities, limited financial resources, and holes in prior education. They may also include entering honors programs, focusing on admittance to a secondary admit program, having an aggressive transfer plan, or taking advantage of a 3+1 transfer program. Every student enrolling in community college comes with a unique educational background and goals and requires tailored assistance to help them transition effectively into the college experience. Identifying these needs early enables institutions to design programs and interventions that prevent students from feeling overwhelmed or overlooked during their first critical interactions with the college.

Taking a proactive approach makes students feel seen and supported. By managing logistical challenges and promoting solutions, community colleges can emphasize that they understand how a student fits on their campus. When students understand the opportunities available to them, both while at the institution and after, they feel the college cares about them holistically. This is emphasized through offerings such as flexible class schedules, accessible financial aid resources, and support services, which establish a nurturing environment that fosters success from the start.



Leveraging Insights From Enrollment Data

Data plays a crucial role in shaping a strong onboarding experience. By utilizing tools like CRM systems, colleges can collect and analyze information collected from inquiry forms, applications, event registrations, transcript data, and other enrollment data to understand their students better. These insights allow administrators to create personalized experiences tailored to individual needs, such as targeted communication about financial aid or transportation resources.

Liaison's Enrollment Marketing services and solutions, for example, make it possible to design actionable surveys that gather additional specific student information. When paired with one of Liaison's CRM solutions—TargetX or Outcomes—these tools let colleges transform raw data into meaningful insights so that every student interaction is intentional and relevant.

Aligning Student Goals With Offerings

A critical component of the onboarding process is maintaining alignment between the institution's academic offerings and students' aspirations. Community colleges serve as hubs for both credit and non-credit programs, catering to those seeking degrees, certifications, or workforce training. Matching these offerings with community workforce needs and student career goals boosts the relevance and appeal of the institution.

However, this alignment requires a nuanced approach. Students must be guided toward tracks that not only meet their immediate needs but also facilitate long-term opportunities for stackable credentials. Institutions can leverage enrollment data to identify trends, assess demand, and craft messaging that resonates with prospective students' goals.



Building a Student-Centered Enrollment Journey

Creating a student-centered enrollment experience requires institutions to connect with students meaningfully, starting well before they officially join the campus community. By tailoring outreach initiatives and addressing individual needs, colleges can build trust and cultivate a sense of belonging that increases the likelihood of enduring success. This process must blend strategic early identification, personalized communication, and a commitment to breaking down barriers.

Early Identification and Engagement

The foundation of a good enrollment journey lies in identifying prospective students as soon as possible. For community colleges, this means understanding the unique circumstances and motivations of their audience. Using tools like CRM systems, institutions can analyze behavioral data to locate prospective students who might benefit from targeted engagement.

For institutions aiming to expand their reach, Liaison's Intelligent Names offers an AI-powered service to identify high-intent adult learners likely to enroll within the next 12 to 18 months. By leveraging advanced analytics, **Intelligent Names evaluates attributes such as income, educational attainment, and geography, helping colleges connect with traditionally hard-to-reach degree seekers.** This targeted, data-driven approach allows institutions to engage prospective students earlier and more effectively, ensuring a more personalized enrollment experience.

Once identified, prospective students should be guided through a seamless and supportive trajectory tailored to their needs. Based on Liaison's inquiry response research, a key first step is improving form accessibility, ensuring that Request for Information (RFI) forms are easy to locate on the homepage and streamlined with 5-7 required fields to increase completion rates and reduce abandonment.

Liaison also recommends implementing automation for fast responses, enabling institutions to generate immediate, personalized follow-ups to inquiries. By leveraging student data, colleges can craft tailored messages that reflect individual interests and academic goals, fostering stronger connections. In addition, adopting an omnichannel approach—integrating digital platforms like email, social media, and text with traditional methods like phone calls or direct mail—creates a fully connected communication strategy that maximizes reach and engagement.



With these insights and tools like Liaison's CRM and EM systems, institutions can efficiently collect early identifiers, automate meaningful engagement, and deliver a proactive, student-focused enrollment experience.



Customized Communications

Effective communication is at the heart of a student-centered approach. Generic messaging often fails to connect with diverse student populations, but personalized outreach can have a profound impact. By leveraging dynamic content tools, community colleges can craft messages that resonate with specific audiences, building confidence that the college will support resolving concerns regarding transportation, financial aid, academic interests, transfers, career plans, or accessibility.

For example, Liaison's CRMs allow institutions to deliver tailored communications based on individual preferences and circumstances. Whether addressing part-time or full-time enrollment options or connecting students with extracurricular opportunities, these tools help make every interaction feel intentional and supportive.

Breaking Down Barriers

Community college students often face systemic challenges, such as generational poverty, food insecurity, and logistical obstacles. While institutions cannot resolve these issues entirely, they can equip students with the tools and resources needed to navigate them. Offering affordable technology that can be accessed through financial aid awards, demystifying the stigma around tutoring, and designing resources to combat food insecurity and lack of financial literacy are just a few ways colleges can empower their students.

It is also critical to foster an inclusive environment that encourages students to ask for help when needed. Proactive omnichannel communication, transparent procedures, and visible support systems can make students feel valued and capable of overcoming challenges.



Leveraging Technology in Onboarding

For community colleges, onboarding often presents a unique set of challenges: limited staff resources, overwhelming administrative tasks, and the need to meet their students' diverse expectations. Addressing these obstacles requires more than just incremental improvements—it demands innovative solutions that can scale to meet institutional and student needs. This is where technology emerges as a transformative tool. It provides the means to bridge gaps, streamline processes, and create a student-centered approach that supports individuals throughout their onboarding experience.

Data Readiness

One of the foundational elements of leveraging technology is making certain that institutional data is prepared for effective use. Clean, comprehensive, and actionable data allows technology platforms to deliver their full potential. Whether it's tracking prospective students through the recruitment pipeline or managing enrollment communications, well-organized data is the key to success.

To create a comprehensive dataset, it is crucial to identify the desired outcomes and work backward from them. For instance, if understanding the institution that a student plans to transfer to is essential for effective advising, this information should be collected at the right time to support that goal. Similarly, if onboarding does not include specific content on intercollegiate athletic opportunities—leaving that responsibility to individual sports coaches—it's best to avoid asking questions about athletic interests. Doing so could set unrealistic expectations for prospective students.

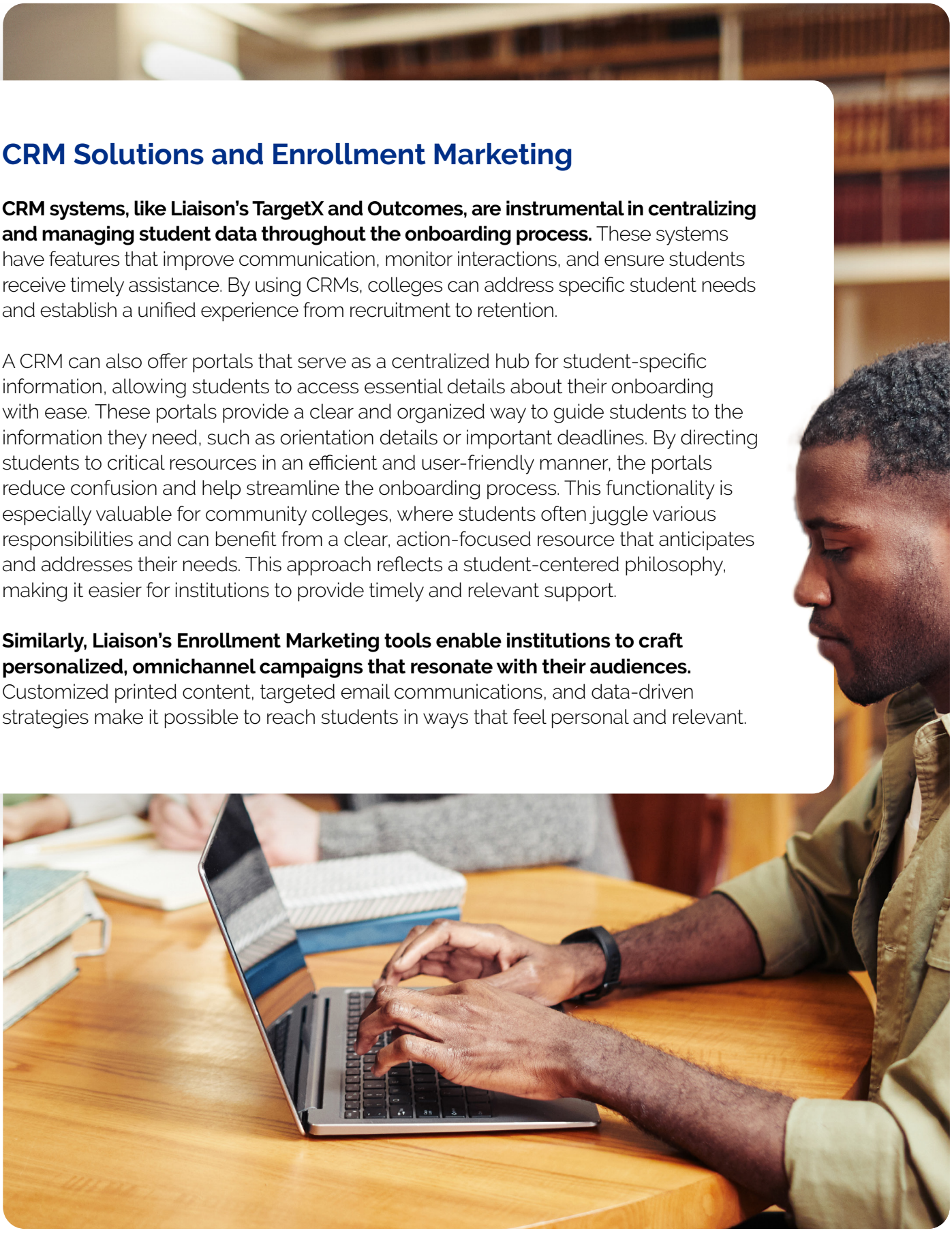
Once the ideal dataset is identified, colleges can start by conducting audits of their existing data and identifying gaps or inconsistencies. With a robust data infrastructure, technology platforms can convey accurate insights that inform decision making and enhance student support.

CRM Solutions and Enrollment Marketing

CRM systems, like Liaison's TargetX and Outcomes, are instrumental in centralizing and managing student data throughout the onboarding process. These systems have features that improve communication, monitor interactions, and ensure students receive timely assistance. By using CRMs, colleges can address specific student needs and establish a unified experience from recruitment to retention.

A CRM can also offer portals that serve as a centralized hub for student-specific information, allowing students to access essential details about their onboarding with ease. These portals provide a clear and organized way to guide students to the information they need, such as orientation details or important deadlines. By directing students to critical resources in an efficient and user-friendly manner, the portals reduce confusion and help streamline the onboarding process. This functionality is especially valuable for community colleges, where students often juggle various responsibilities and can benefit from a clear, action-focused resource that anticipates and addresses their needs. This approach reflects a student-centered philosophy, making it easier for institutions to provide timely and relevant support.

Similarly, Liaison's Enrollment Marketing tools enable institutions to craft personalized, omnichannel campaigns that resonate with their audiences. Customized printed content, targeted email communications, and data-driven strategies make it possible to reach students in ways that feel personal and relevant.



Supporting Long-Term Student Success

Onboarding doesn't end with enrollment; it's the starting point for a comprehensive strategy aimed at helping students thrive throughout their educational journeys. By fostering proactive support, celebrating milestones, and prioritizing seamless transitions, community colleges can set students up for sustained success.

A well-executed onboarding process ensures students feel supported from the start, reducing the likelihood of early dropouts and building a foundation for long-term success. This continued focus on retention helps students stay on track, meet their goals, and ultimately graduate, benefiting both the students and the institution.

Proactive Support

To manage challenges before they become major obstacles, colleges need to adopt proactive strategies that anticipate student needs. AI-driven tools like Liaison Othot provide predictive and prescriptive analytics, helping institutions not only identify at-risk students but also determine the best course of action for intervention. By analyzing behavioral and demographic data, these tools can pinpoint potential issues, such as financial hardships or academic struggles, and recommend specific, evidence-based strategies to address them, facilitating timely and tailored support.

CRMs also play a role in proactive student engagement, offering real-time data to track behaviors like engaging with support or participating in campus activities. This confirms that interventions are not merely reactive but also strategically aligned with individual student needs.

In addition, Student Success Centers can amplify proactive support by leveraging tools such as alerts, success scores, and dedicated success team members. Alerts flag immediate concerns, such as missed assignments or low attendance, allowing staff to intervene quickly. Success scores give an overall assessment of a student's likelihood to persist, helping institutions prioritize support efforts. Success team members, including advisors, counselors, and tutors, work collaboratively to address student challenges and provide personalized guidance, maintaining a cohesive and well-rounded approach to retention and success.



Celebrating Milestones

Recognizing and celebrating student achievements, both large and small, builds confidence and motivation. From completing their first semester to reaching significant academic goals, these moments present opportunities for colleges to engage and support their students.

With TargetX, colleges can automate celebratory communications, such as sending congratulatory emails or organizing recognition events. The "kudos" feature, for instance, notifies staff of a student's progress, triggering an email that congratulates the student and invites them to participate in a campus celebration.

Seamless Transitions

The hallmark of effective onboarding is making sure that students experience smooth transitions from one stage to the next. Whether moving from recruitment to matriculation or progressing through academic milestones, these transitions should feel natural and helpful.

By utilizing CRMs to centralize processes, colleges can ensure that both students and staff have the tools they need to navigate each stage smoothly. For students, a unified system simplifies access to resources and reduces confusion, while for staff, it streamlines workflows and allows for more focused, personalized support. This continuity fosters a sense of stability and empowerment, helping students stay engaged and confident as they work toward their goals.

Evaluating Onboarding Strategies

To ensure that onboarding strategies are efficacious, community colleges must establish clear metrics for success and implement a system for continuous improvement. Tracking key performance indicators (KPIs) and leveraging feedback loops allows institutions to refine their processes and adapt to evolving student needs.

Defining Success

Measuring the impact of onboarding requires defining what success looks like at each stage of the student journey. Key metrics might include:



Application-to-enrollment conversion rates | Understanding how many applicants matriculate gives insight into the effectiveness of outreach and onboarding efforts.



Success through the semester | Monitoring student achievements, such as successful first assignments or attending a first campus activity, helps identify early indicators of engagement.



Alignment of goals and outcomes | Tracking how well students' original aspirations align with what they complete ensures programming supports their interests.

Together, these metrics provide a foundation for evaluating onboarding strategies and identifying areas for improvement.

Continuous Improvement

Onboarding shouldn't be static. By incorporating data and feedback loops, colleges can continuously refine their approach to meet the needs of their student populations. This might include:



Gathering student feedback | Conducting surveys and focus groups can deliver qualitative insights into students' onboarding experiences, highlighting both strengths and pain points.



Closing gaps | Resolving identified weaknesses by implementing targeted changes, such as updating communications, can enhance support services.

By committing to a cycle of evaluation and adjustment, institutions can create onboarding processes that are both responsive and resilient, ensuring they remain effective as student demographics and expectations evolve.



CONCLUSION

Creating a Holistic Onboarding Experience

Effective onboarding is more than just a process—it's a commitment to student success and institutional excellence. For community colleges, a well-designed onboarding strategy addresses the unique challenges of their student populations, reduces administrative burdens on staff, and facilitates a seamless track from recruitment to matriculation and beyond.

By centering student needs, leveraging data-driven insights, and integrating technology solutions, institutions can develop an onboarding experience that is not only efficient but also deeply impactful. From proactive support to celebrating accomplishments, every touchpoint in onboarding plays a role in creating a sense of belonging and empowering students to achieve their goals.

Liaison's tailored solutions simplify processes, personalize communication, and optimize outcomes for community colleges. Tools like TargetX, Outcomes, Enrollment Marketing, and Othot transform onboarding from a challenge into an opportunity for meaningful engagement.

Let's connect to discuss how Liaison can support onboarding for long-term success at your community college.

About Liaison

Through a powerful combination of technology and services, Liaison assists higher ed institutions and students in making informed enrollment decisions. Our vision of fostering a more educated world fuels our passion for expanding access, simplifying experiences, and empowering decision-makers. With over 30 years of experience, we've served over 1,200 campuses and supported 40,000 programs globally, empowering individuals, partnering with institutions, and strengthening communities in the pursuit of knowledge and success.

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