5 SIGNS OF A HEALTHY

STUDENT JOURNEY

From academic progress to financial health, grit, and beyond

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Tip: Start by rethinking how you define "health"

Student services professionals often fall into a trap. They see the pain points they'd like to improve upon, and develop some focused practices to try and improve in that area. They then evaluate their success based on how well they executed those practices, rather than gathering a holistic understanding of how well students are doing.

Of course, in order to take this more holistic approach, some clarity around what "health" means for students is necessary. It's inevitable that people who work with students develop a sense of the overall "health" of a student's educational journey, but often, these impressions are intuitive or experiential.

The more student groups or institutions one works with, the more complex the picture of a "healthy" student gets. Whether or not your institution has formal plans and measures of student success, developing a shared vocabulary for how to speak about student success across departments and schools is a huge asset as you continue to collaborate to serve students.

Drawing from academic research and experiences of both our customers and staff who have served students directly, we've distilled five major categories for measuring a student's health across their student journey.

These categories are broad by design, so they can apply to students beyond the specifics of educational programs, student types or other individual characteristics. They're also flexible, so they can adapt to the types of tools and staffing already at your institution's disposal.

It is important to note that these are not entirely "objective" measures; the students' perception of their own health in these categories is as important (if not more so!) as any external measure that can be conducted.

The five categories are:

- Academic Progress
- Financial Health
- Social Well-Being
- Grit & Self-Efficacy
- Growth & Opportunities

ACADEMIC SUCCESS

Making academic progress starts with the question: progress toward what end?

Whether a student is making "satisfactory academic progress" is often one of the primary measures considered by student success programs. It bears the connotations associated with federal regulations and financial aid, but for these purposes, it's a bit simpler. Recently, Evan Pauken, Director of Retention and Student Success at Kalamazoo Valley Community College described it as momentum, and suggested asking the question, "Are students making progress and can they see that progress?"

Making academic progress begs the question - progress toward what end? When students are able to articulate their educational goals, the markers of academic progress are much easier to define and track.

A first-year, first-time freshman taking general education courses at a community college intending to transfer to a four-year program will have different markers of progress than a senior nearing graduation with their bachelor's degree, or from a personal enrichment student looking to brush up on some professional skills.

Regardless of the educational goal of the student, establishing and continuing momentum and making academic progress is a vital measure of health.

At the highest level, a student should be asking themselves three big questions when assessing their own academic progress:

Tip: Ask whether students are making progress, and if that progress is visible to them.

1

Standards: Am I meeting learning objectives?
This will typically be about grades and satisfactory academic progress. However, it may also include things like acquiring skills, retaining information, and more.

2

Timeliness: Am I moving forward at the right pace?
For some students, this means staying enrolled full time and taking extra courses during summer and breaks. For others, it means maintaining a balance with all other life factors but continuing to move toward that educational goal.

3

Fit: Is this the program for me?
This applies to courses in a particular term, choice of major, program, and even school.

Now, most students are probably not asking themselves these questions in such an explicit and direct ways. However, if students are concerned about their academic progress, they tend to articulate their concerns in terms fairly close to what was laid out here. If student services professionals can help provide students with language like this to reflect on and assess their experience, they'll see this continue throughout the other measures of health.

It's easy to get caught up in collecting data for its own sake, or the tasks associated with daily routines, but ultimately, a students' perception of their own journeys can offer the most insight. If students are equipped to first ask themselves the right questions, we can further equip them to address obstacles and concerns along the way.

Tip: Equipping students to ask themlselves questions about their progress allows them to address obstacles early on

FINANCIAL HEALTH

Teach students to assess their financial situation by equipping them to ask a few major questions

Any time spent in the retention and student success fields will quickly reveal that financial issues are one of the primary obstacles toward achieving an educational goal. From major, systemic issues like food and housing insecurity to smaller, individual needs like gas money or paying a small account balance, finances can take a student's momentum down quicker than almost anything else. It's because of this that there are so many regulations and large-scale resources available to address finances in education.

Most schools have said that the problem they have when students encounter financial issues is not whether there are resources available to address a particular need, it's whether students are aware of the issue and know how to get help.

Similar to academic progress, it's important to start to teach students how to assess their own financial situation by equipping them to ask themselves a few major questions:

FINANCIAL HEALTH

TARGET X

1

Am I meeting my baseline obligations?
Whether it's paying a student account balance or an electricity bill, students all have baseline obligations to meet.

2

Am I making responsible decisions?
Students are making decisions about money all the time that impact their whole lives; everything from deciding whether or not to take out more loans, or picking up extra shifts at work. By helping them reflect on how decisions fit into their educational journey, we can help them connect the dots between seemingly disparate situations and their larger values.

3

Am I prepared for the future?
Even students who are meeting their baseline obligations may encounter financial obstacles that could impact their education. Helping students to ask questions about how prepared they are for their future helps them situate themselves in a larger story about their financial health that includes things like budgeting, money management, and loan repayment plans.

THREE:

SOCIAL WELL-BEING

A student's social well-being includes more than just the ability to make friends on campus

SOCIAL WELL-BEING

Students develop three main types of connections during their educational journey: connections with their peers, their faculty, and the school as a whole. Each of these three types of connections feeds a larger sense of social well-being.

Traditionally, these things have largely been considered in terms of social engagement: is that first-time freshman living on campus attending events and building relationships with their classmates?

While this is certainly one way to measure social well-being for students, the increasing diversity of students in higher education requires some deeper digging.

Not all students are looking for the same kinds of relationships in order to feel satisfied with their social well-being during their educational journey. Because of this, paying close attention to a student's perception of their social well-being becomes much more valuable in assessing the health of that student.

A student who has an established social base on and off campus might not need the same level of care as, for example, a first-generation student who may need some guidance in finding ways to connect in the collegiate landscape.

Social well-being is not just about what kinds of friendships a student makes. It's also about whether the student considers themselves a valued member of the school in a larger sense.

Are they making connections with faculty in the ways that they hoped? Do they feel cared for and "seen" by the institution? Are their contributions — both inside and outside the classroom — seen as valuable and meaningful?

These factors are certainly not as easy to measure as something like event attendance, but they get closer to the heart of what social well-being in an educational community is really all about.

The major questions we can help students ask themselves to assess their social well-being are:

Tip: Social well-being comes in many forms, including connections with peers, faculty, and the school

TARGET X

1

Do I have connections that match what I'm looking for?
This question can be further broken down into three categories:

- Am I connecting with my peers in meaningful ways? Are there opportunities to find social, academic and professional connections among my peers?
- Am I building relationships with faculty that fit with my expectations? Am I taking classes from faculty members who are experts in my field of choice? Are there adequate opportunities for me to connect with them for both academic support and professional guidance?
- Am I connected to my school? Am I finding adequate places to get involved? Am I finding sufficient support for my journey?

2

Do I feel valued in my community and in my contributions?
This question extrapolates on the kind and quality of the connections formed in each of the three major categories. Belonging is about feeling like you matter, not just that there are events you can attend or office hours that have been made available.

GRIT & SELF-EFFICACY

Help students grow in the skills they need to face obstacles head-on

GRIT & SELF-EFFICACY

TARGET

Terms like 'grit' and 'self-efficacy' are concepts that are notoriously difficult to define, measure, and monitor. However, they have also been woven throughout everything covered thus far. In all of the major areas covered, challenges and obstacles can arise for students at any time, and they most certainly will.

Our role as student services professionals is not to make sure that no obstacles arise for any student at any point. If that was the standard, everyone would come up short. Our responsibility is to help students grow in the skills they need to face obstacles head on, to see them as part-and-parcel of the educational experience as a whole, and to know where to look and who to lean on for help if they need it.

Tip: Don't try to prevent problems for students; rather, help them grow the skills needed to face them

Self-efficacy is a fascinating concept, particularly in that it is not at all related to someone's actual abilities in a given area. It's entirely about self-perception. And beyond that, it's not a personality characteristic or quality that is inherent in a given individual. It can be taught, grown, and cultivated.

To help students start to cultivate their own sense of self-efficacy, you can start by directing them to ask themselves these questions:
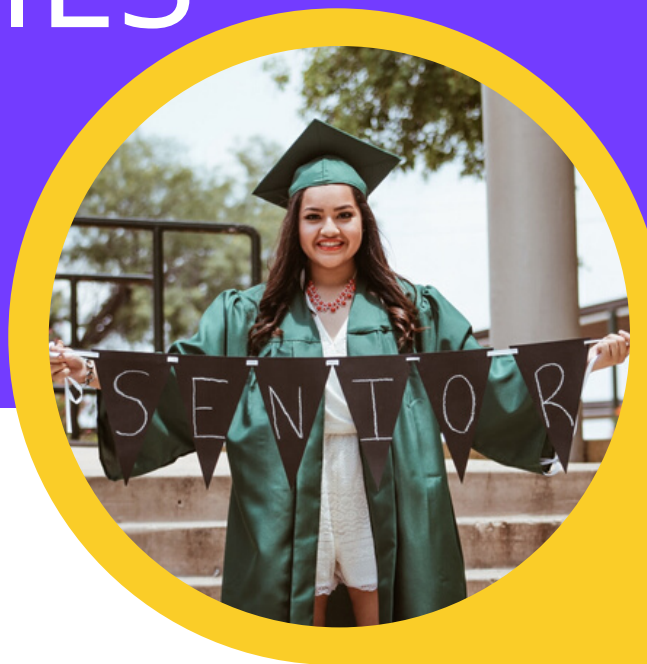
1. Am I equipped to face challenges that may come up?
2. Do I believe that challenges are opportunities for growth and learning?

OPPORTUNITIES & GROWTH

Help students keep an eye on the "Exit" sign throughout their educational journey

One of the best aspects of education is that it's always about moving and changing. Education is by definition a process of change, a process of entering into a program or community or intellectual space intending to exit different from how you entered. Helping students to keep an eye on that "Exit" sign throughout the duration of their educational journey can be one of those guiding lights of the health of a student journey.

The details of what happens after a particular educational goal is achieved may vary greatly in their scope. Students may have their eye on specific job opportunities available to push them down a clearly defined career path.

They may have an advanced degree planned and need to be ready to navigate a new application process and new academic community. Or, they may be more nebulous in their expectations for the future, hoping to have had certain formative experiences like studying abroad, or wanting to develop character traits or practices that will shape their life.

These approaches will likely result in greatly different needs on the student's part, but they're all part of helping a student to assess their opportunities and plans for growth beyond this specific educational journey.

Helping students to ask these questions will give them a sense of what they're looking for as they look beyond their immediate educational goal:

1. How will my education serve me going forward?
2. How will my education impact my life and my career?
3. Am I ready for what comes next? What will it take for me to get ready?

Tip: Students will have vastly different goals after graduation; remind them that education is a process of change

SO,

WHAT COMES NEXT?

Putting all five pieces of the puzzle into practice

This approach with developing these five types of measures of health of a student journey was meant to be open-ended. These five categories are designed to put the spotlight on areas to pay attention to, areas in a student's journey that are most likely to contribute toward achieving an educational goal in a healthy way. There are tools and staff and resources and values that will shape the practical application that you take at your school in measuring the health of your students' journeys.

You may choose to use surveys or guided advising questions in appointments with students. You may decide to collect new or different data points about students, or you may decide to use the information you've already been collecting in a new way. You may work with your individual team to start thinking creatively about how to assess these five areas, or you may start a larger conversation with a more strategic focus.

Wherever you are, wherever you hope to go next with your student success efforts, these measures of health can provide a shared language to speak of student success at your campus, with your professional colleagues, and beyond.

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