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Accenture x Workday for Higher Education

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Serving the Digital Student

The next evolution of technology innovation in higher education

A long walk to the provost's office, a credit transfer, an update to an alumni database—anyone who has ever been a student at a college or university has had to work with the administrative backend of higher education. This backend impacts the work of students, professors, and all the employees that make a university function day-to-day. Today, students hold these administrative functions to a higher digital standard, as 96% say a high-quality digital experience is important to their satisfaction with their campus.

This priority reflects a broad set of shifts impacting today's student body—they are digitally savvy, demographically and geographically diverse, and approach higher education with new needs. Universities need cutting-edge technology—AI, data analytics, intuitive platforms—to see what's happening in real-time and to adapt to solve challenges.

For instance, since going live with [Workday Student](#), [Worcester Polytechnic Institute (WPI)](#) has smoothly completed student registrations since the fall of 2021. During the very first registration time frame, 900 sophomore students registered for nearly 4,000 course sections in just one minute. Now WPI provides equity to the registration process by allowing the entire sophomore cohort to register within a single registration window, eliminating the need to process registrations in several appointment windows across several days.

"WPI's implementation of Workday Student also eliminated the need for old pdf forms used for updating current students' personal information, contact information, and program of study changes, thus increasing efficiency and improving user experience," says Sarah Miles, University Registrar.

Ryan Gaetz, Accenture Managing Director and Global Workday Education and Government Lead, says, "With legacy student systems it can take weeks to glean relevant data, and by then it is often already stale. WPI is proof that with Workday Student, organizations can access improved insights and adapt much more quickly to the ever-changing needs of their campus communities. We were so proud to partner with WPI on their Workday Student implementation."

With user-friendly technology, universities can empower evolving student bodies to make more decisions about their experience. Students will always be the heart of higher education, and institutions must be privy to changing preferences to boost enrollment and retention.

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The new student

As demographics and preferences change, so must higher education

Education industry professionals predict an "enrollment cliff" for the "traditional" college-age population as it becomes more diverse regarding race, gender, and age. With crashing rates of "traditional" students, universities must look beyond borders to develop a global student body and address the needs of the growing group of nontraditional students—evolving professionals, mid-career climbers, and people looking to change professions.
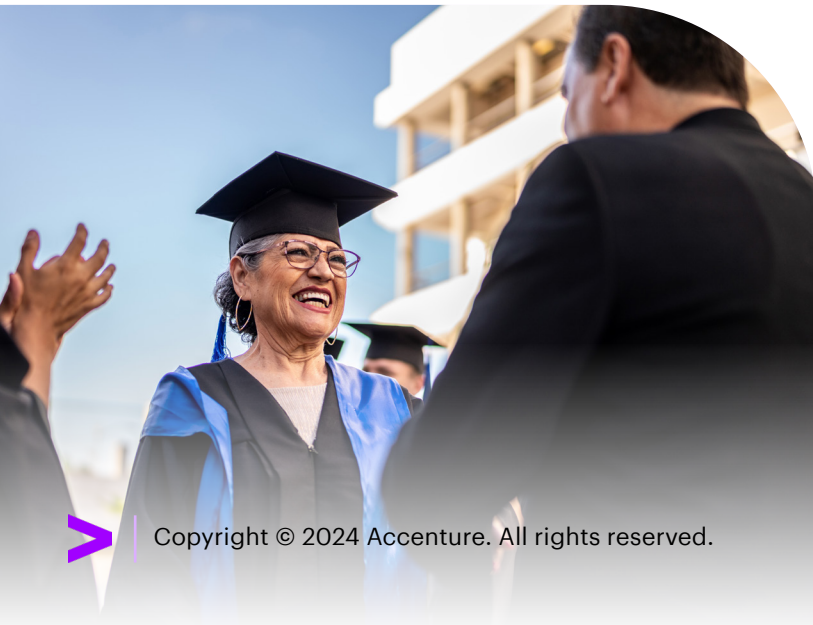
Colleges and universities must prepare to meet the needs of this next generation of learners. To do this, institutions must learn the specific motivations and expectations that drive different kinds of learners. Accenture surveyed over 6,500 students to identify six learning outlooks encompassing these demographic changes.

The priorities of the modern student have changed. Nontraditional students express greater interest in programs that help them upskill, reskill, and earn non-degree credentials. Accenture's survey found that all six learner groups desire digital tools to support their success. Students believe universities should improve their non-academic and administrative support, including mental health and financial counseling. They expect more virtual services, from IT and financial services to counseling. Since the pandemic, they also expect remote and hybrid class models.

With the "enrollment cliff" looming, colleges and universities must adjust to continue attracting, engaging, and retaining students. General Manager of Higher Education at Workday Mike Hofherr describes the options: "Institutions of higher education only have a few levers to pull to stay in business. They can focus on net tuition revenue: growing and retaining headcount. Or they can focus on becoming more efficient by streamlining processes. Workday offers a sweet spot for growing efficiencies while simultaneously identifying opportunities for students."

Universities must be more attuned to student satisfaction, use real-time data to understand students' likes and dislikes, and use technology to fill gaps quickly. However, the technology used in higher education is often outdated—the average student information system (SIS) is older than the students using it. The 20- or 30-year-old technology is limited to providing rear-view analytics; these systems were built for a different time and a different student.

A solution: Workday can integrate the most current technologies, and universities can use fresh data to learn more about student backgrounds and participation levels, financial needs, activities, or work studies they're involved in. By using Workday Prism Analytics, decision-makers can import and blend external data sources with Workday data which produces a holistic view of students. For example, the platform can monitor external sources of data such as when students hand in assignments, attend chapel, or eat meals and blend such activities with native Workday data sources like academic progress, financial aid status, past due statements, and notes and conversation details.

When current data provides meaningful insights, universities can proactively identify at-risk students and quickly take action, says Shane Topping, Workday Senior Director. "Most campuses rely on rearview analytics and insights to support a student's success by studying what happened in a previous semester. This means a full year could go by until students are identified as at-risk and receive the support they need. Whereas, if campuses have a continuous pulse on key attributes and monitor such elements on a weekly basis, advising offices can proactively identify student risk profiles and take action in the moment, rather than a semester or two after the fact." All learning institutions, from community colleges to public universities, can use technology tailored to each student's needs to help them succeed and solidify their institutional futures. The key is establishing a data strategy that enables internal and external data sources to be blended to gain a holistic view of students.

Digitally-enabled higher education

Technology for the university of the future

Universities already need an advanced digital workplace system to meet many needs. Class registration, financial aid, academic advising, and student finance - every part of a student's life is mediated through the administrative backend of the university. That's why colleges and universities need a digital experience platform that handles every touchpoint of the student journey from recruitment to graduation (and, in some cases, beyond). Industry professionals often say that getting a new digital platform is like getting a heart transplant in higher education—it impacts every corner of the organization.

Steven Gstalder, Fairfield University Vice President for Information Technology and Chief Information Officer shares, "We're strategically implementing Workday Student in phases, carefully considering each function and service so that we can offer the best user experience for students, faculty, and staff. One of the main reasons we chose Workday is its mobile-friendly, intuitive, and highly accessible functionality."

Mark Ligas, Vice Provost for Undergraduate Excellence and Associate Professor of Marketing at Fairfield University says, "We are excited for a wide variety of capabilities after our 2025 Workday Student go-live, but particularly that one platform will accomplish so many administrative tasks. Fairfield students will enroll in classes, submit payments, and request transcripts; faculty will view schedules, enter grades, and view advisee information; staff will view academic progress, review financial aid needs, and offer support to students."

Today, a workplace system must engage students throughout the modern expectations of their journey, capturing data at every touchpoint to optimize the student experience, no matter where they are in the world.

When a large university medical center went live on Workday Student, it took the medical center just ten minutes to create a report on live student registrations—something the team had never had oversight of before.

When universities track data from across their ecosystem in real-time, they can improve programs and make more informed interventions. For instance, with Workday's Academic Planning feature, universities can predict which courses students plan to take in future semesters. The university can then prepare for the demand so students can take the necessary classes without wait lists and last-minute changes, increasing student satisfaction.

Furthermore, cybersecurity is a growing concern in higher education and beyond—a robust digital workplace system sets the foundation for safe, protected university data. Embracing AI has the potential to enhance the employee and student experience of many stakeholders; simple tasks and questions that would have required a cross-campus journey or a surplus of red tape can be automated.

Gaetz on the downfalls of operating on legacy technology: "Higher education understands the complexity of the businesses they run, but they are underprepared to do so if they operate on legacy technology. Employee, faculty, and student insights have made one thing clear: they cannot continue to run multiple billion-dollar companies without access to modern data insights."

Consider a real story from Furman University. A student suddenly had to drive home to North Carolina to address a family emergency—on the last day of class registration. In the past, she would have had to stay at Furman, tethered to the campus network, to wait for a brief time slot to enroll in the courses she wanted. With Workday's integration, she could pull over at a rest stop and register from the side of the road in seconds. Students shouldn't have to choose between family commitments and academics. A flexible digital architecture eliminates the need for that choice.

What's next for higher education

By serving students with digital technology, universities can survive and thrive

A solid digital workplace platform doesn't just benefit students—it benefits everyone across the institution. Colleges and universities can improve collaboration and simplify basic tasks by merging all data into a single system. From admissions to grading, Workday can streamline parts of nearly every campus job while gaining more transparency, agility, and security.

Most importantly, digital technology improves the student experience by meeting the needs of this new generation of learners. Older, more global, and less traditional in their goals, this new generation demands digital excellence from their higher education providers. Institutions that provide that excellence will boost student engagement, optimize their offerings, and attract talent in the increasingly challenging recruitment market. With advanced analytics, educators and administrators can better understand their students—their background, financial situation, and academic performance—to set them up for success.

If higher education is going to reverse the trend of reduced enrollment successfully, it will have to adapt. Through Workday, Accenture can help colleges and universities serve students and build a strong digital foundation. This technology can smooth the student experience, boost engagement, and provide actionable insights to leadership teams in their quest to create a modern, tailored, and adaptable educational experience fit for a changing world.