

Why the Student Experience Matters

Listening to the voice that's been missing from education reform

MELISSA WITHERS

If the conversation about innovation in education were a cocktail party, the room would be filled to capacity with advocates, scholars, administrators and college and university leadership who all care very deeply about the future of higher education in America. The talk would be lively, with fervent debate over issues like distance learning, student readiness, class size, tenure, course load, state funding and financial aid. There would be bursts of raucous solidarity and an equal measure of passionate dissent about where we are, how we got here and what we need to do to move forward.

What you would not hear is the voice that matters most: the voice of the student. To hear this voice you must tune into a different channel altogether and listen at a frequency that most institutions and policymaking bodies do not understand.

Many institutions seek to capture the student voice through market research, including surveys and focus groups. These are worthy exercises and institutions that use these methods deserve credit.

Still, most conversations about education reform reflect the perspective and agenda of the institutions that provide educational services, rather than the needs of the students they serve. Institutions don't typically see it this way and take great offense at the suggestion that they do not have student's best interests at heart. Most of them do. But what is true in life is true in higher education: Despite our best intentions to give students what (we think) they want and need, we often miss the mark.

The reality is that the student experience is all but lost in our current conversations about the future of higher education. As we struggle with shrinking endowments, abysmal cuts in state funding, changing student demographics and a growing awareness that it is nearly impossible for the current system to educate enough Americans to produce the workforce we need to remain globally competitive, it is no surprise that the student experience takes a backseat to these seemingly more urgent issues.

The nonprofit Business Innovation Factory (BIF) recently received a grant from the Lumina Foundation for Education to bring the student experience to life in a new way and make the student voice more central to our conversation about transforming higher education. With this investment, BIF launched its "Student

Experience Lab" in spring 2009. In alignment with Lumina's focus on postsecondary degree attainment, the lab's initial phase of work focuses on illuminating the college student experience and creating a platform to increase college-attainment levels, enhance the college student experience and improve the effectiveness of the U.S. higher education system.

We embarked on this endeavor under the premise that the current U.S. postsecondary education system does not deliver—at sufficient scale or at an affordable price—a high-quality college experience that prepares all students with the skills they need to fully participate in the 21st century global economy. As a result, too many current and prospective students are left with their educational and economic needs unmet.

We are not the first to draw this conclusion. Many articulate education advocates and forward-thinking business leaders have expressed grave concerns about the cultural and economic impact of America's failure to move more students through an effective postsecondary education experience. What is unique about BIF's approach is our belief that transformational innovation in education begins with a deeper, more personal understanding of the student experience and a willingness to experiment with new models of delivering education that put the students—not the institutions who serve them—at the center.

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In our first phase of work, the Student Experience Lab team is creating an "experience map" of the environmental and human factors that are the most significant drivers of the postsecondary student experience. This approach has been used for many years to design better consumer products, yet is not typically used to inform efforts to innovate in education. You wouldn't design a new iPhone without talking to college kids, yet we design whole educational experiences with only the slightest awareness of what students want and need.

The good news is that techniques for understanding "user experience" are validated from years of use in industry. Our challenge is to transfer those approaches to the world of educational research and embrace what

they have to offer. In this way, we can view the student experience through a new lens that offers an invaluable complement to the insights most institutions and experts bring to the table.

BIF's approach

Central to BIF's nonprofit mission is our work to help partners from across the public and private sectors focus on solving problems by designing and testing new solutions in a real-world environment. BIF's Elder Experience Lab is a good example of our methodology in action. In the Elder Lab, BIF's team works directly with elders to conduct deep research into their everyday experience, using these insights to illuminate opportunities for transforming the elder care system, and with help from the lab's elder participants, put new ideas to the test in a real-world environment. With Lumina Foundation's support, it was a natural transition for BIF to apply the methodology it had developed to understanding the student experience.

In this approach, the BIF Student Experience Lab team uses a combination of observational and ethnographic research, self-reporting and surveying, in conjunction with an analysis of secondary research drawn from today's best and brightest scholars to characterize the experience of current, former and prospective post-secondary education students at various ages and from

diverse racial and socioeconomic backgrounds. To bring the first-person perspective to the fore, the team captures its primary research on video, empowering students to take an unapologetically personal stance on the issues that enhance and hinder their higher education experience. Take, for example, what the team learned about the issue of readiness from a young man named Sean. In an interview, Sean says, "Educationally I was ready to go to college. Personally I wasn't ready to go

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to college. I needed to figure out who I was before I made that decision." Sean saw college as an important investment of his time and money and felt that the decision on when and where to go to school should be a well-informed one. The challenge, he noted, was that it became increasingly hard to enter the system later, as options narrow for learners who do not enter the system as 18-year-old undergraduates.

This primary research is supported by secondary research and the team has invested more than 200 hours

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talking with education experts and advocates from all sides of the debate. But the strength of the work hinges on the time the team spends working with students, engaged in interviews, informal meet-ups and visits to students' homes and classrooms.

Lab Design Director Chris Finlay has deployed a savvy network of researchers across the country to capture the experiences of students at a variety of schools and at many stages of life. Students are recruited through social media outlets like Twitter, via referrals from teachers and advisors and from flyers posted in coffee shops and grocery stores. In the first three months of the project, Finlay and his team conducted more than 40 deep interviews with students from all walks of life and garnered input from dozens more. They met with high school students considering their higher education options, students already in the system, adult learners navigating the school/work divide, students who have failed or dropped out for personal and financial reasons and everything in between. They talked with students at elite colleges, community colleges and trade schools. They met with students in BIF offices, held group conversations and whenever possible, met with students on their "turf." And we captured all of it on video.

Leveraging the approach BIF has used in other Experience Lab work, the team will package its findings in a highly visual and interactive form that uses video, audio, photography and first-person narrative to tell the story of the postsecondary student experience in a manner that allows experts and non-experts to understand the human, environmental and systems-level factors that most impact degree attainment.

This approach enables stakeholders to see the experience through the lens of the student, better appreciate the dynamics of the whole system and more readily identify opportunities for innovation and intervention. This deep understanding of the student experience also enables BIF and its partners to identify specific elements of the experience where investment in innovation is likely to yield the greatest return.

The team is on track to have its first phase of work completed by December 2009. This work will lay the foundation for an even more valuable asset: an actionable platform for experimentation. Through our work, we are creating a national network of individuals, organizations and students who share our belief that experimentation is key to creating deep transformational change in the education system. This network, in conjunction with BIF's

platform for real-world experimentation, will form a living laboratory where new ideas for improving the college student experience can be designed, tested and refined with direct student engagement. The team hopes to move into active experimentation in spring 2010.

We need in education, as we have in most industries, R&D platforms that enable systems-level experimentation, where disruptive ideas can be tested in real-world conditions but in a manner where risk can be managed and the scale-up of proven ideas accelerated. Imagine if we worked to understand the student experience with the same vigor that cell phone companies worked to understand youngster's mobile computing preferences? There are some glimmers of this spirit of experimentation in education, but we need to multiply the effort.

Bringing this vision to life is what motivates the BIF Student Experience Lab to make the real-life experiences of students more visible and elevate the student voice in the conversation about innovation in education. BIF's ambitions will not be easy to fulfill, but offering Americans more affordable, more effective and more flexible options to get educated and improve their economic prospects is well worth the labor.

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