

# Connections count:

Humanizing your university to  
strengthen the enrollment journey

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# Contents

- 3. [Introduction](#)
- 4. [Research](#)
- 6. [Challenges and Opportunities](#)
- 9. [Strategies for Success](#)
- 12. [Final Thoughts](#)





“I feel like I’m just a number.”

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**Students have been known to say this about the college experience. So, what can your institution do to address this misconception?**

“I’ve spent 14 years in the higher ed industry, and one thing has always been clear to me,” said Jennifer Lonchar, vice president of strategy at Net Natives. “If you want your students to see the value in your institution, you have to see the value in them.”

Michael Morgan, a strategist at Net Natives, echoes Lonchar’s thoughts and emphasizes how important it is to differentiate yourself from competitors and attract students who become passionate brand advocates. To accomplish this, you have to get to the heart of your potential students.

“It’s about connecting with students in a way that respects them as equal partners — that’s how you will humanize your institution,” Morgan said. “Students face many barriers that impact their ability to put their best selves forward during the enrollment process and beyond. By understanding this, you’ll be more authentic in your marketing, which makes it easier to connect with students who truly belong at your institution.”

But the reality is that higher ed marketers can’t humanize their university or college alone.

“Students are looking for more than just a degree,” Lonchar said. “They’re looking for an institution where they can be their authentic selves, and grow personally and professionally.”

Lonchar points out that students also “don’t know what they don’t know.”

“For example, most students are living on their own for the first time and may not realize how the university and its services can help fill that parental gap,” she said. “A university can make or break a relationship with a student based on how they respond to student needs, and whether they make the student feel important — or like just another number.”

But, accomplishing this in a way that comes across as authentic and sincere can be a challenge. The good news is that Lonchar and Morgan are here to help.

Read on for their thoughts on why humanizing your university should be a priority, the challenges and opportunities you might encounter, and their strategies for success.

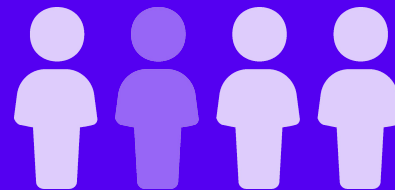
# Research

With knowledge comes power. To better understand why you should be prioritizing this shift in your attitude and communication, it's important to have a handle on the latest national data regarding student perceptions about their universities.

Here are some trends to have on your radar.

**Trend #1:** A Student Voice survey of 2,003 college undergrads from *Inside Higher Ed* and *College Pulse*, with support from Kaplan, found the following:

**One in four** respondents disagree at least somewhat that their college understands the connections they have to their families and home communities.



**One-third of students disagree** at least somewhat that their colleges are responsive to the needs of all students.

**Nearly one in four college students** disagree at least somewhat that their college makes an effort to understand their current experiences and challenges.

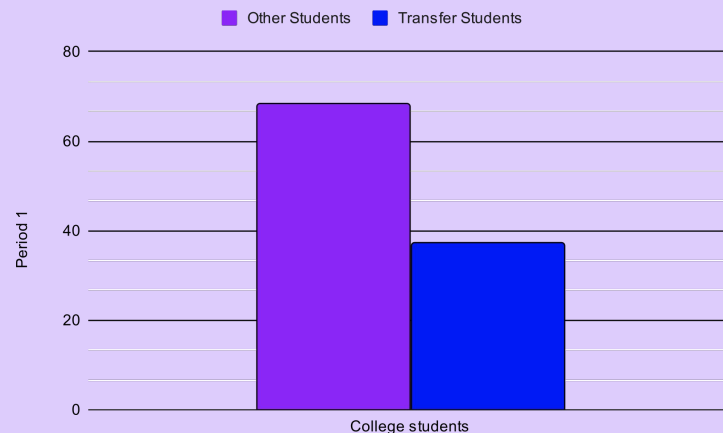




**Trend #2:** According to a 2021 study in the *Journal of Further and Higher Education* and [Times Higher Education](#), students feeling a sense of belonging at their institution is a major contributor to student retention.

**Trend #3:** [New data](#) from the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center show that 37.2 percent of college students transfer at least once within six years, with the “student-school fit” being a leading reason.

“Students require flexibility in learning,” said Andrew Magda, director of market research at Net Natives. “This can also extend to the enrollment process. Rigid rules and policies don’t cut it today, because students are weighing not just where to go to school, but if they even have to or want to go. By making the process more flexible and easier for them, it can be a win on both sides.”





# Challenges & Opportunities

Now that you're aware of the emerging trends, what are the challenges and opportunities higher ed marketers and admissions professionals should consider?

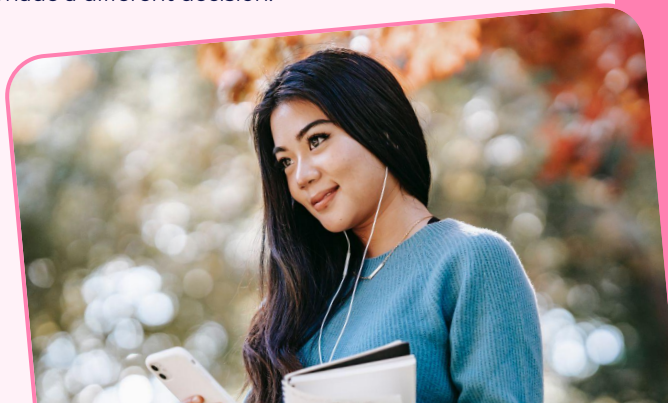
# 1

## Student-school fit.

"The student-school fit is a guiding principle that will help you attract the best students who are the best fit for your institution — and will help students get the best out of their institutions," Morgan said.

"It comes down to being self-aware about who you are as an institution, and then trying to reach the students who will be receptive to that," he said. "For example, if you know your institution is focused on academics and research over social opportunities, then you'll want to target students who feel most comfortable in that environment. And remember, it's not a bad thing to be one or the other."

If you don't focus on student-school fit, you end up trying to be everything to everybody. This can lead to poor retention in the future because students who feel more comfortable in a rigorous academic environment — and maybe less comfortable at a football tailgate — might find themselves wishing they made a different decision.



# 2

## Red tape.

The enrollment process alone can set the tone for a student's journey at your institution. But, how do you know you're putting the right foot forward? Lonchar points out that the admissions process can leave many students feeling confused and frustrated.

"From the application process to financial aid and even housing decisions, students may encounter a lot of challenges and delays that can make them feel like they're just a number in a machine," she said.

Admissions and student success departments have the opportunity to simplify this process through continued communication, care, and relationship building.

"For example, I think the biggest drop-off in communication happens after students are admitted," Lonchar added. "After students make their deposit is the perfect time to foster these relationships and help them through the next journey."

One solution is to implement an automatic text campaign to admitted students that can provide them with links and resources that answer questions about housing, financial aid, parking, and more.

"Proactively communicating this type of information will go a long way to building those relationships — and also in decreasing summer melt," Lonchar added.

# 3

## Relationship building

Lonchar views relationship building as more than just a means to an end for admissions professionals. It's just as much about retaining students as it is about getting them to enroll.

"Although I can't speak for all institutions, it seems at some schools, senior faculty and administration typically do not interact with students after they're admitted," Lonchar said. "In our first 2023 [Students Speak feature](#), several students highlighted interactions with senior faculty and leadership as a factor in their decision to enroll at their current university."

More importantly, Lonchar adds that institutions can provide opportunities for faculty and leadership to empower students at all stages of their journey. She recommends checking out YouTube for examples where university administrators have done fun things to get more connected with their students.



# 4

## Authenticity in communications.

Morgan thinks of authenticity as being an excellent tool for humanization, and a way to show students that an institution understands its challenges.

"It's horrifying for students when they invest time and resources in enrolling at an institution that they don't feel connected to later on," Morgan said. "The school has to be upfront about their course offerings, lifestyle, and culture — you want your institution to be confident in how they communicate themselves, so that it taps into something in the student, and so they can see themselves at the school."



# Strategies for Success

Now that you have an overview of current U.S. research, challenges, and opportunities from our Net Natives experts, how do you implement strategies that will help you show prospects and students that you want to make and maintain an authentic connection?

We asked Lonchar and Morgan for their thoughts. Here's what they shared.

## 1) Be transparent in communications.

"In my mind, 'authenticity' is another word for both transparency and contextualization," Morgan said. So, what might that look like for admissions professionals and marketers in higher education?

- **Admissions professionals:** Colleges need to be more upfront about their challenges and finances to their students and prospective students, Lonchar said. "This includes being honest about programs that may be dissolved or are struggling in the job market," she added. "Giving students all of the information allows us to solve previously mentioned challenges, such as school-fit, red tape, and even relationship building."
- **Marketers:** As a recent graduate, Morgan has some advice for higher ed marketers. "When I was deciding which college to go to, I saw this video from Bates College that talked about their decision to go test-optional in the admissions process," he said. "The difference between Bates and others I'd seen is that they framed and explained their reasoning behind key processes at their university. For me, this video was the deciding factor. I appreciated how it went beyond stating a fact and contextualized things in a way that went the extra mile."



## 2) Build (real-time) connection in the admissions process.

### Ask the right questions.



For example, admissions officers should ask open-ended questions during any interaction with a student, Lonchar said. She adds that this is how students start engaging in conversation and building trust with their enrollment counselors.

“Ask them about their weaknesses and where they’ve needed help in the past, or about any challenges they think they might face in college,” Lonchar said. “If you can learn about some of these opportunities early in the process, it can help set these students up for success in the future. Sometimes it takes someone just posing the right questions in order for them to open up.”

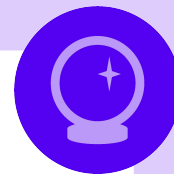
### Leverage the right technology.



Communicating with students using the correct technology is also important. Think about how you’re interacting with them during and after the admissions process. Are you relying solely on email and phone calls? Or, do you utilize text messaging, too?

“Students are overwhelmed with email these days, so relying on it as your main method of communication could mean your important messages are getting lost,” Lonchar said. “There are many companies that offer chatbots and texting tools that remove the need for additional staff, but keep the lines of communication open. Being proactive in your outreach to students can genuinely make them feel heard.”

### Go beyond enrollment.



Earlier, we revealed that more than 30% of students transfer from their original institution. The good news is that admissions officers may be able to play a role in increasing retention.

“For example, have enrollment officers attend on-campus events like career preparation seminars, activity fairs, and graduation events so that they can keep a relationship with the students who are currently enrolled,” Lonchar said. “These people are familiar to your students and can make them feel more comfortable and connected. This can play a huge role in whether students stay at your institution — or transfer to another.”

### 3) Make it easy to belong.

#### **Simplify red tape.**

Financial aid is a great example of red tape that may cost institutions enrollment numbers throughout all four years, Lonchar points out.

“In terms of financial aid, there are three pieces of advice I always champion: start the conversation with students early, meet them where they are digitally, and leverage your relationship with the financial aid office,” Lonchar advised. “You can read all about it in our blog [Three pointers for helping prospects navigate financial aid.](#)”



#### **Ask your students.**

Lonchar recommends surveying a panel of current students who are in various stages of enrollment — and in different programs — to identify areas for improvement.

“Institutions conduct this kind of research in a variety of ways,” Lonchar said. “But, questions about belonging shouldn’t be ignored. For example, you have to get to the bottom of whether or not students feel connected to their faculty and administration, their peers, and the opportunities on campus — and why or why not.”

Good questions to ask include: “Do you feel like you are learning what you need from your professors?” and “What are your biggest challenges with being involved on campus, and where do you feel you need help the most?”



#### **Don't just tell them, show them.**

“Belonging is institutional in that it matters how you curate spaces for different students,” Morgan said. He adds that there are many different ways students can feel at home. “The first step is to be very clear about what actually happens on campus. For example, if there’s a video game club on campus that’s extremely popular, make that clear. The next step is to use TikTok, Instagram, and other social media to show how the video game club meets, or what activities they partake in on a weekly basis. You need to tell a story via organic content. Instead of telling people what happens, show them.”



# Final Thoughts

**First impressions matter.** Now that you're armed with research and strategies, you're ready to reboot your communications to more authentically connect with prospective and current students. So, take the time to ensure your prospective student journey is smooth sailing by bringing our team in for a consultation. We'll learn about your recruitment/conversion processes and the technology you use to support them. Then, we'll share our strategies for success — and for getting the most bang for your enrollment management buck.

Let's get a conversation started today

