What do we expect?

A Special Report for Education

Dr. Vince Tinto, professor of higher education at Syracuse University, suggests that teachers and leaders in higher education should invite a diverse group of students to dinner and then ask them about their learning journeys. During dinner, Tinto suggests, just be quiet and eat, ask and listen. You will see more than just the humorous maxim, "If you feed them, they will come," demonstrated—because the students will also share. Their responses will vary widely, from affirming to insightful to inane to downright stunning. If you leave the conversational space open, the students will fill it with the good, the bad and the ugly.

As students, faculty and education leaders debrief from these conversations, you often hear them echo the refrain, "What do we expect?" Think of the broader world in which these students live—one of rapid changes, high expectations and diverse backgrounds—and their responses make sense.

We engage in, hear about and help institutions respond to these conversations. The expectations from students, trustees, community members, legislators, faculty and staff cascade our way in the form of project plans, RFPs, side conversations and desperate phone calls. Regardless of how they are communicated, it's clear that the following expectations are changing and challenging the education world.

Stability

People don't want to hear the history of technology's evolution at their institution. They just want the stuff to work. Faculty members want the data projectors to project, students want the online courses to load, and employees want the HR system to produce a paycheck. Educators and students are losing patience with the cutting edge; they just want the edge to cut. Given this rising penchant for what's real and stable, it's not surprising that University of Phoenix, Walden University, and now, Western Governors University are seeing strong growth. All three institutions leverage technology-enabled learning tools, but they have also combined the tools with the ultimate symbol of stability in the education world— accreditation.

Connection

The results of Casey Green's 2004 Campus Computing Survey (www.campuscomputing.net) make it clear that information silos not only still exist in higher education; they are becoming more complex and discrete. However, the students, faculty and administrators we serve at colleges and universities have little use for disconnected systems that don't work and can't play well together. Again, if airlines, pharmacies and credit card companies can integrate their storefront, online and Web services, the faculty, staff and students of each institution fully expect the same experience on campus. It's bad enough for a student to have to visit five buildings to complete an on-campus registration process; having to log in and access three online, disconnected systems throughout the semester is also trying students' patience. These expectations of readily available connections are being ratcheted up to include interinstitutional connections. Increasingly, students, community members and legislators want K-12, community college and university silos to be connected. Middle college, dual enrollment, concurrent enrollment, transfer and career integration programs are being showcased and used as never before—and technology is often a key bridge in these endeavors.

Integration

Everyone on campus wants more seamless integration. Our discrete processes and procedures—pay-for-online, over-the-phone, in-class learning or other services—are our issues, not our students. What is becoming increasingly clear is that educators intend to blend these service modes. While we may currently call it "hybrid" or "blended" learning, soon we will just consider it modern education with different tools. Moreover, students want to see programs that are more integrated. Given that students are increasingly swirling in and out of education—achieving multiple credentials at different times in their lives—many of them crave programmatic integration (e.g., certifications that build to diplomas to degrees).

Customization

"Our students have Amazon.com expectations," say higher education leaders, and students are not alone. The administration, faculty and staff at colleges are bringing their personalized experiences with TiVo, eBay, iTunes and online banking to work with them. In short, they don't just want access to services; they want more direct services. Faculty members and counselors often initiate these conversations. They want to be able to better target tools and techniques to different students based on wants and needs. They want these tools at their disposal and at their students' fingertips. What they don't want is "vanilla" technology and services that are sent their way as an afterthought.

Answers

Google has raised the bar. We have become used to doing complex research on almost any topic, at all hours of the night and in the comfort of our own homes. No more treks to the library or visits to IT that leave you frustrated or at the mercy of information gatekeepers. Students, faculty, staff and administration are used to getting answers, and now they want them from our technology systems. Faculty members want to ask questions about curricula effectiveness, while counselors want to explore the impact of interventions. Students want to see up-to-date information about how they're doing and where the road ahead may lead. In Lisa Petrides' new book, *Turning Knowledge into Action*, published by the League for Innovation, she refers to this as a rising "culture of inquiry" in higher education. What better place for this expectation to arise than in education, where the core value of critical thinking can be applied to this very process.

Value

Patience with the investment side of technology has long since passed. The "dot-bomb" era helped seal that fate. From college CIOs to first-year students, everyone wants to see the value of the time, effort and money they are putting into technology. If they don't see that value promptly, they are quickly frustrated. The Educause Center for Applied Research (ECAR) recently produced a report about student perceptions of the use of technology in education. One painful observation—made again and again in the research—was that students often felt that there was little value in how some technology tools were used. In fact, they felt some were just for show. "Death by PowerPoint" was the exact term used. Major technology systems that aren't used to their full potential receive much harsher assessments.

Authenticity

The book, *The Cluetrain Manifesto*, arguably offers the harshest attack on inauthentic messaging and leadership in the corporate world. According to its authors, "Markets are getting smarter, faster, than at any time in human history." They bluntly state that people just don't believe anything that is communicated in company press releases, advertisements or promotions. Consumers check out the facts on their own through Consumer Reports Online (www.consumerreports.org), Epinions (www.epinions.com), listservs or vast networks of friends. In addition, Jim Collins, in one of the hottest leadership books on the market, *Good to Great*, argues that the myth of the charismatic leader is just that—a myth. His research supports the true transformational power of deferential, authentic and focused leaders.

In the education world, Parker Palmer challenges faculty members with the same Emersonian notion in *The Courage to Teach*. He makes the point that "who we are" will overpower any teaching technique or technology tool in changing students' lives and improving their learning. People are as sick of true believers overpromising and underdelivering as they are of caustic cynics raging against almost any change. Faculty, staff, administration and students crave real conversations about how to improve learning journeys, whether they are technology-enabled or not. Projects such as

the Lumina Foundation's Achieving the Dream (www.luminafoundation.
org/grants/atdfaqs.html) and such organizations as the Continuous
Quality Improvement Network (www.cqin.org) are taking on this challenge
by asking difficult questions about how to improve student access and
success by working collectively to answer these questions. Technology
may be able to help in this work, but neither high-tech nor low-tech
strategies will have any significant impact unless dedicated professionals
use them with authenticity.

Whether expressed by students, trustees, faculty or staff, these
expectations resonate with us. More important, they are clearly spurring
activities, efforts, plans and projects. And what do we expect? Educators
care most about making a difference; and responding to these rising
expectations may help us all do just that. ■

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Additional Reading
Campus Computing Survey ■
www.campuscomputing.net

Lumina Foundation's Achieving the Dream ■
www.luminafoundation.org/grants/atdfaqs.html

Continuous Quality Improvement Network ■
www.cqin.org

Turning Knowledge into Action ■
Lisa Petrides

The Cluetrain Manifesto ■
Christopher Locke, Rick Levine and Doc Searls

The Courage to Teach ■
Parker Palmer

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