The future of feedback:

How student experience can lift your competitive advantage

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As the overall cost of higher education continues to increase, and alternatives to the once-traditional four-year education emerge, students continue to expect more from their educational experience—and it's up to institutions to deliver. In today's environment, an exceptional student experience is no longer a "nice to have," but a "must have," to attract and retain students.

Higher education—like virtually every industry—faced unprecedented upheaval in the spring of 2020 with the COVID-19 pandemic, and since then it's become more important than ever for schools to quickly learn about and address the changing needs of students and families. To maintain their relevance and competitive advantage, schools must systematically listen to the people they serve and deliver an experience that will set them apart.

There's no question: Student experience matters to students. In fact, according to new research from SurveyMonkey, 30% of students say they applied to a given school because they believed the school cares about its students. But less than 50% think their school cares about them "very much."

If there's one finding that universities should heed, it's this: Nearly 30% of students say that knowing what they know today about their college or university, they would either choose another school or opt not to go to school at all.

How can higher education improve on these numbers? The key is to focus on gathering student feedback to determine how well you are delivering on your promise to students and to uncover what changes you might need to make to have a positive impact.

30%

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A guide to building effective student experience surveys

Knowing how vital the campus-goers' experience is, many colleges might wonder how they measure up, realizing that the opinions and feedback of many stakeholders can shape the perception of what kind of a student experience they offer. The first step to learning more about how students feel is asking the right questions to get candid, actionable insights.

Here are 7 considerations from Erin Pinkus, Senior Research Scientist at SurveyMonkey, for designing and conducting a survey that will help you move the needle on understanding and improving your student experience.

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1 Create a plan that incorporates existing research

Start with both the beginning and the end in mind—in other words, decide what you want to measure and then ultimately what stakeholders will do with the results. Next, determine what information you already have and the gaps you need to fill. For example, is the survey intended to find solutions to an identified problem or is it to determine what the problem might be? Are you trying to track changes over time, or are you looking to understand something new?

"Do an audit of what you already know, which will help inform the direction of your survey," Pinkus suggests. "You'll want to balance whether you're most interested in tracking how opinion changes over time on a specific topic or issue, against the possible benefit of asking new questions to understand a timely topic."

You'll also want to be judicious when deciding which questions to keep or let go. "Each question takes up valuable real estate on the screen, so it has to earn its spot, particularly as we know people are increasingly taking surveys on mobile devices," she says.

2 Work with an expert to ensure a well-designed survey

If you really think through the many steps of creating and analyzing a survey, you may start to wonder whether you are actually going to be able to conduct it yourself. "How realistic is it that I am going to have the time to write, program, and launch the survey, analyze the data; and then have time to share insights and next steps with my stakeholders?" Pinkus asks. She recommends consulting the tools SurveyMonkey has created to help make everyone feel confident in their survey-writing ability and streamline the questionnaire design process, such as starting with **templates developed by experts** or running the programmed survey through **SurveyMonkey Genius** for suggested improvements.

But when it comes to developing the questions, sometimes the person writing the survey is not the person who is an expert in what stakeholders are hoping to measure. That's why you might consider making the survey design phase a cross-functional effort, pulling in different people who have a stake in the results, such as an expert on the topic at hand.

3 Foster trust in the survey

Consumers today are bombarded with surveys, making it easy to ignore them entirely. "If you were to get an email that says, 'Hello, [first name],' you'd immediately realize the organization didn't take the time to tailor the invitation to each individual, thus giving a negative first impression," says Pinkus, who recommends clear customization.

You also want to pay attention to who actually sends the survey. We know from SurveyMonkey's research that nearly 20% of students say they are more likely to take a survey from their school if it comes from someone they trust. For example, if "Jane@company.com" sends an email surveying students at UCLA, you can imagine why students would be less likely to respond than if the invitation came from the dean of their department or their instructor—someone they likely trust—asking them to complete a survey to help inform programming for the future. "It's all about the first impression," Pinkus says.

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20%

4 Make it compelling

"We like to refer to surveys as conversations that scale, so you want to keep the survey conversational," Pinkus says.

Here are a few other best practices that can improve participation:

Optimize for mobile
Many people will take your survey on a hand-held device, so make it easy to click and scroll.

Keep it short
From SurveyMonkey's student poll, they found that two key factors that would boost likelihood to answer a survey were its length and knowing

upfront how long the survey would take to complete (42% and 37%, respectively). Pinkus says keeping most surveys as short as possible is key. While there is no "sweet spot" number of questions to ask, think of the end user when deciding how many to ask. If the survey takes too long to complete or is too complex, people will drop out.

Start easy
"Make life easy for those taking your surveys. Get to the point quickly and then start off with a very easy question, such as a yes/no or multiple-choice question," Pinkus recommends. Open-ended questions or long-winded introductions can be really off-putting and cause dropout rates to spike—avoid this as much as possible.

5 Test the survey

Sometimes it's not until you take the finished survey yourself that you might uncover an issue—perhaps you forgot to ask the survey taker to indicate major or graduation year, if that's pertinent. If it's a survey with multiple paths because you've employed survey logic to customize the experience for each respondent (great job!)—test-drive each path. "Tap into stakeholders or others with a vested interest in the outcome, because they'll have useful input and be more likely to catch any issues or gaps in the survey," Pinkus advises.

6 Keep an eye on the survey while it's running

As survey responses start rolling in, Pinkus recommends watching for patterns, a step she calls a "survey health check." For example, as you look through the first 50 or so responses, you might notice that many respondents stop after question 5. That's your cue to revisit it with a different eye to find the problem—if the sticky question was marked as "required," you may want to consider marking it as "not required" to increase participation.

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7 Develop an actionable plan for using the feedback you collect and close the loop

Determine the most important pieces of information, and use that to build a communication plan for various audiences. And, Pinkus says, you don't even necessarily have to create a massive report. "Findings from your data can live anywhere," she says. Add a note to your website that says 90% of students requested more art history and that's why you've added a course, for example. This helps to foster trust with students because, as we know, the top cited way to get students to take surveys is to let them know how the data will be used. You can also report out the results to all survey takers—the level of prominence is up to you. You can use and display results in so many ways, from a dedicated page on your website to a few snippets on social media.

The key is to know what you plan to do with the information you collect and then share your findings.

But there's another reason to share results, Pinkus notes. Students may be less likely to take future surveys from the same source if they don't believe their input is being used, valued, or creating change.
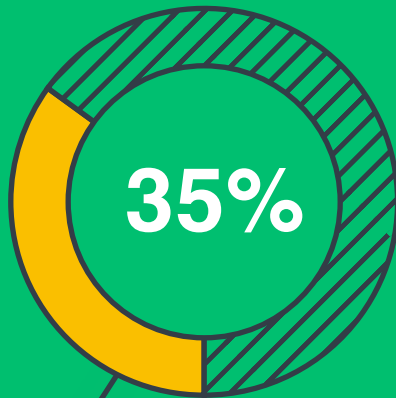

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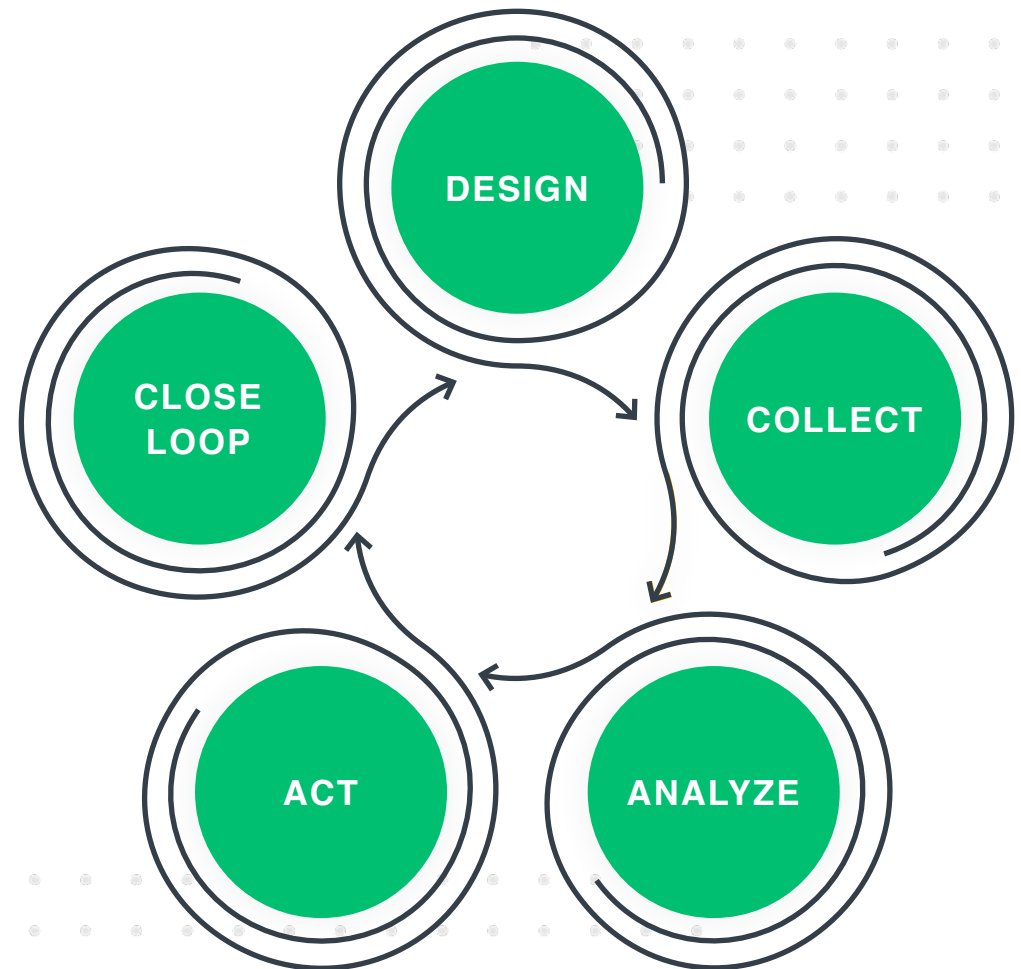
Three ways to elevate student experience

Here are 3 key ways schools can respond to the needs of students.

35% of today's students still say they are **not developing** the skills they'll need post-graduation.

35%

# Provide educational offerings that develop skills needed for tomorrow's workplace

A college degree has often been considered a requirement for developing and advancing your career. However, SurveyMonkey's poll finds that even after four or more years of time and money spent on education, 35% of today's (2020) students still say they are not developing the skills they'll need post-graduation.

Schools can fill this gap in a number of ways, including developing a robust, industry-specific internship or co-op program and highlighting research opportunities and other hands-on learning programs that can elevate a student's resume. Regular communication with industry leaders can ensure that universities offer innovative and practical courses, programs, and experiences that develop the critical skills necessary come time for graduation.

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2 Prioritize faculty and staff who deliver the institutional promise

More than 80% of students surveyed say that having top-ranking faculty teaching at a college or university campus adds to their overall student experience, indicating the importance of focusing on attracting and retaining highly ranked faculty.

Higher education administration and leadership must deliver a positive experience that will keep faculty there, and the only way to ensure administration is meeting expectations of the faculty is to ask—and then provide meaningful changes based on their responses. While SurveyMonkey finds that nearly half of full-time faculty and staff agree they are surveyed frequently, less than a quarter of them say their feedback is regularly turned into meaningful action. On top of this, an additional 20% say their feedback is never taken into consideration or were unsure whether it was.
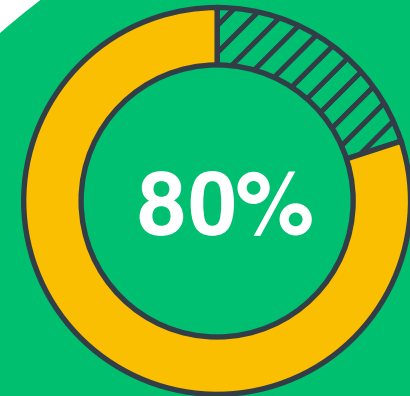
80%

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40%
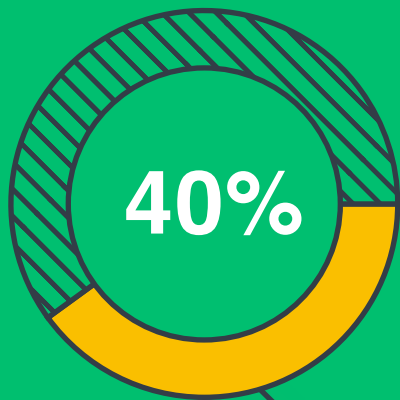
3   # Create an overall sense of community by finding out what students want, then act on it

Community helps foster a sense of belonging for students when they step onto campus. SurveyMonkey's poll finds that nearly three-quarters of students say they feel their campus is a connected community (which is great!). Unfortunately, less than 40% say their school takes action based on the needs and wants of students most of or almost all the time, illuminating a miscommunication between students and their school. Though students feel their campus is well-connected, there's still more schools can do to turn feedback into action on the ground level. That presents a university's greatest challenge—and opportunity—as they seek to meet the needs of their various audiences.

How often to survey?

Now that we've covered best practices for creating surveys, you may be wondering how often is too often. Here's some advice from Pinkus.

Current students

Of course today's students are your top target, and it's important to keep them engaged and satisfied. First and foremost, you want them to graduate and eventually become active alumni. The good news is that students are an easy group to target, Pinkus points out. "They either live on campus, commute in, or are interacting with classmates and instructors in an online learning environment, so they are engaged regularly." She recommends surveying them about their experience every quarter or semester. SurveyMonkey research found that more than half of faculty surveyed their students on that timetable, most likely through **course evaluation surveys**.

Alumni

This is another important group, because they have fully-formed opinions of the school and can serve as ambassadors for prospective students. In general, though, you'll want to survey them less frequently Pinkus says, perhaps once a year. "While many alumni may have pride in and care for their school, they might have lost touch or not maintained a strong connection," she points out.

If the goal is to get them to be more engaged, find out what alumni events or groups they're currently involved with, if any, and which additional options resonate. If you'd like to encourage donations, ask them what types of programs they'd be most inclined to support. You could also use the survey to determine if they are interested in joining a database of professionals available for informational interviews or other projects.

How Bermuda College uses surveys to improve student experience

While Cordell Riley, Institutional Research and Planning Coordinator at Bermuda College, conducts multiple surveys each year through SurveyMonkey, one of his most successful projects has been a set of two surveys to assess campus-goers' experience—one that students complete when they first come to campus, at Career and Counselling Services, and another that they complete when they graduate from their program.

When Riley started at Bermuda College in 2014, he was asked to update these incoming and outgoing student surveys. That's when he saw an opportunity to enhance the information they collected from students. By asking similar questions at both points in time, Riley could analyze each student's experience during their time at the college.

For example, during survey analysis, they noticed that one graduating class had a markedly lower percentage of students traveling overseas. Curious, they compared this data with the information students had supplied in their intake survey and realized that this particular group had been more interested in professional development and internships from the beginning.

"All of a sudden, it made sense that fewer were going away, because it jelled with what they said they were interested in when they arrived," Riley says. "We realized there wasn't a problem after all—they merely had different goals."

Survey responses have led to real changes at the college. For example, although administrators knew the facilities could use a face-lift, they didn't tackle the problem until they collected feedback from students and uncovered ongoing negative comments about the dated classrooms. "Having the complaint voiced by the students was impactful," he says, adding that they have since focused capital money on upgrading the classrooms, with a long-term plan in place.

Running student-experience surveys also uncovered confusion around when certain courses were offered. "As a small community college, we can't offer all courses every term, but we knew students just needed more information. We've revamped our catalog to show when those courses are going to be offered so students can plan ahead," Riley says.

For Riley and for Bermuda College as a whole, surveying students, staff, and faculty throughout their time at the college makes it easier than ever to keep a pulse on campus-goers' experience and identify areas for impactful and positive change.

"Having the complaint **voiced by the students** was impactful."

Cordell Riley
Institutional Research and Planning Coordinator at Bermuda College

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Bring the power of survey data to your campus today

Creating a positive student experience is too important to leave to chance, and the more you can find out about what your students truly want, the better you can pivot to meet their needs. With the tips, tricks, and research you now hold in your back pocket, you're ready to take a new approach to designing, implementing, launching, and analyzing campus-experience surveys that will lift your competitive advantage. We can't wait to see how you connect and engage with your students, staff, faculty, and alumni!

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SurveyMonkey's **enterprise-class survey platform** gives higher-ed institutions an easy way to **collect reliable feedback** across multiple touchpoints, **discover meaningful insights**, and make that data **accessible to the right teams**, all within the systems they are already using. By understanding the opinions and perspectives of students, faculty and staff, people that are crucial to their success, institutions can make **better, more informed decisions**.

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