

## Mapping Student Engagement in Higher Education

Journey Mapping is a common tool used in experience planning. This model allows strategists to facilitate interactions with their brand and assess gaps in the intended experience. But this approach can also be used in higher education to visually represent student engagement throughout their relationship with a college or university. Instead of mapping experience using the five stages of the customer journey, administrators can use the same engagement journey to breakdown the stages of student experience.

To create more meaningful connections, we can move beyond traditional transactional models in favor of an experiential framework that allows for more personal considerations such as thoughts, feelings and emotions experienced throughout the student journey. A primary journey map for higher education would show the lifecycle of student engagement and the major touchpoints that typically occur. It would also include what the student experience should be throughout the 5 phases of their educational journey. Those phases are:

**Awareness → Research/Consideration → Conversion → Interaction/Engagement → Advocacy/Loyalty**

Consideration must be given to each phase to achieve a comprehensive engagement strategy. Early stages provide a foundation for subsequent touchpoints, all working together to build a stronger connection.

- Awareness

Awareness asks the questions of who needs to know about your services and how do you reach them: primarily prospective new students and transfer students. At this point in the journey, our map should include how these audiences would know that you offer what they're looking for, such as a particular degree program. Consider the variety of emotions that one goes through when making such important decisions. How are you catering to these unique needs?

Awareness includes touchpoints such as school marketing, degree program promotions, recruiting efforts and various enrollment campaigns. Your efforts can contribute to the moment of inspiration and help establish expectations.

- Research/Consideration

Once a student is aware of the opportunity for higher education, they will move into the research and consideration process to explore their options. During this phase, higher education leadership must acknowledge typical search patterns and behaviors of their target audiences to create an emotional response that resonates with students.

Touchpoints during this phase would include browsing your website, engaging with social media platforms, participating in campus tours, using resources you provide and reading content you've made available. The goal here is to stay in front of students so you stay in their mind. Make it easy for them to use you as a reference to find the answers to their questions. This phase also starts the conversion process including the application submission experience.

- Conversion

Conversion is important as this is where an actual decision is made. What are the determining factors when selecting a college or university? To maximize applications, higher education must ensure a pleasant recruitment process with personalized attention and tailored experiences. Ongoing communications must be planned to instill a sense of belonging and comfort for the future. Just as 67% of consumers are willing to pay more for a better customer experience, students (and their parents and guardians) will give high consideration to those institutions where they have created a strong bond early on, and throughout the early stages of the student's journey.

Conversion would include interactions such as pre-enrollment activities, applying for financial aid and on-campus housing selection. The critical touchpoints here will involve any interaction that can sway a student's decision. Fostering a true sense of belonging is essential for one's final decision, and this can only be accomplished with an experience strategy that facilitates touchpoints early on in the student journey.

- Interaction/Engagement

Once the moment of commitment is complete, the engagement or 'use' phase of the student's journey begins. There are many sub-processes that occur during interaction such as first year experience, student life, dining selections, course registration, financial aid, academic performance and academic advising to name a few. It is important to consider student participation during their educational journey as this reinforces previous connections and plants a seed for lifetime engagement. Including this phase in journey mapping helps plan for student involvement that will create an exceptional student experience.

Engagement touchpoints include on-campus advertising, transparent communications, newsletters, blogs, continuing education opportunities, social media, event streams and even parking requests. Administrators should use tactics that elicit emotional responses and positive reactions when planning for an exceptional student experience. Even ongoing interactions with admissions offices to receive degrees or transcripts will shape the overall student experience.

- Advocacy/loyalty

Mapping a student's education journey should not stop at graduation. Planning for ongoing touchpoints creates brand advocates, or loyal alumni. If the emotional connection continues beyond academic life, graduates are more active in alumni events and more willing to participate in donor activities. From sparking initial interest to encouraging ongoing engagement and participation, it is also important to remember that brand advocates can play a major role during the other phases of a student's educational journey.

Important milestones during this stage include donor campaigns, homecoming activities, legacy programs and alumni volunteer opportunities such as advisory board participation or returning to campus as guest speakers or subject matter experts.

At first glance, it may appear that the traditional consumer buying journey does not apply across disciplines. However, with a closer look, we see that mapping important decision-making milestones provides valuable insight for higher education administrators and promotes a stellar student experience. And you don't have to stop there. Additional sub-journeys can be created to dig deeper into unique interactions. Activities such as declaring a major and graduation can be dissected further to identify and mitigate any negative interactions that can impair a lifelong relationship.

Using a journey map to define and prepare for the student experience will help colleges and universities attract and retain engaged students who become lifelong school brand ambassadors.