If we review the results of the EDUCAUSE Top 10 IT Issues surveys over the last decade, one trend that is conspicuous is the sudden, seismic-like appearance of the word “student” beginning in 2013. Before that year, issues such as Learning Management Systems, Teaching and Learning with Technology, and E-learning / Distributed Teaching and Learning had drifted across the Top 10 IT issues rosters. While these brought the Top 10 IT Issues into the proximity of the student perspective, they were still one step removed: they described issues and technologies that affected students, but they did not adopt a student perspective. Then, in 2013, the word “student” first appeared with Improving student outcomes through an approach that leverages technology, an issue that veritably leaped onto the list in the #2 position. Since then, the presence of the student perspective has expanded: the same 2013 student issue became #1 the following year, and in 2017, Student Success was the focal point for the EDUCAUSE Review Top 10 article. In both 2018 and 2019, two issues with students as their theme (Student Success and Student-Centered Institution) have appeared in the top 5 issues.

If nothing else, this increased visibility of the student experience and student success runs parallel to, and is a symptom of, an overall shift in the priorities for higher education. As we know, this shift is driven by a variety of environmental factors and trends, some of which are identified by John Campbell and Joel Hartman in their discussion of Student Success (#2) in the 2019 Top 10 IT Issues article. An important additional factor is the increasing diversity of postsecondary student demographics: the “nontraditional” student is suddenly the new norm.

As the 2019 Top 10 IT Issues article makes clear, the issues of Student Success and the Student-Centered Institution (#4) are not just a matter of applying quantitative analyses, increasing retention percentages, and adding a dose of technology. Higher education needs holistic, student-centered approaches that involve numerous campus organizations. Serving a more diverse learner community requires greater thought, planning, and resources. In recent years, EDUCAUSE has worked with many institutions on the implementation of integrated student-advising services, offering a clear example of a new dimension for student support.

In light of this trend, we might ask: is this student-centered direction shared by other higher education communities? The Key Issues in Teaching and Learning survey, conducted annually by the EDUCAUSE Learning Initiative (ELI), provides a definite answer: yes. ELI began the Key Issues survey in 2011, in the interest of getting the perspective of community members whose endeavors are focused on the postsecondary teaching and learning mission.

The 2019 survey marks the project’s ninth round. As in past years, everyone professionally associated with post-secondary teaching and learning was invited to participate, including librarians, the staff of centers for teaching and learning, IT professionals, faculty, and students. For 2019, the ELI Key Issues survey instrument presented respondents with twenty candidate issue topics and asked them to indicate which five of the twenty they felt were the most important or pressing. We received a total of 1,449 survey returns, which is more than 50 percent larger than the previous record high of 940. The institutional demographics of the respondents break down as follows:

- 32% from doctoral institutions
- 14.5% from associates institutions
- 14.5% from baccalaureate institutions
- 13.5% from masters institutions
- 4% from professional and specialized institutions
- 1.4% from campus system offices

Complete information about the results of the 2019 ELI Key Issues survey, along with a summary of all results from 2011 to 2019, is available at the Key Issues in Teaching and Learning website. Overall, the 2019 Key Issues mirror the growing importance of the student perspective seen in the Top 10 IT Issues. This shift is readily apparent in at least five ELI Key Issues.
Instructional and Learning Experience Design. The issue of design ranks very high in the Key Issues survey, finishing #3 or #4 in five institutional categories (associates, baccalaureate, masters, doctoral, and professional schools). The expanded role of instructional design professionals has been characteristic of a change in higher education hiring practices over the past several years. The new job title of learning designer takes the student perspective as the point of departure for course design. More recently, the job title of learning engineer has been promoted by the IEEE ICICLE community; this position combines engineering expertise with a background in learning and learning psychology. But no matter what you call this class of academic professional, the increased emphasis on instructional and learning design, together with the high ranking of this issue in the survey, attests to the growing importance of learning-centered approaches in the curriculum.

Digital and Information Literacies. This issue, an aspect of the student experience, has ranked highly over the past several years. Clearly, one of the ways in which higher education can best serve its learners (and indeed the community at large) is by ensuring that students are educated in the literacies vital to postgraduate success and to their roles as citizens.

Accessibility and Universal Design for Learning (UDL). Here too the student emphasis is unmistakable. Accessibility and UDL are a bit like the obverse and reverse sides of a coin: they both serve learners in the effort to ensure that all students can fully and successfully participate across all learning engagements. This issue has been ranked in the top 5 for the past three years.

Open Education. ELI recently published a three-part report on open education in its “7 Things You Should Know About…” series. This exploration clearly describes the many benefits that open practices can offer students. Well known, of course, are the financial savings students derive from open educational resources (OER). But beyond that, open education provides unique “collaborative, pedagogical practices employing social and participatory technologies for interaction, peer-learning, knowledge creation and sharing, and empowerment of learners.”

Competency and New Methods of Learning Assessment. This issue jumped from the #16 position in 2018 to #6 in 2019. This too testifies to an emphasis on the student and a response to the myriad needs of an increasingly diverse student demographic. As the workplace and the nature of work are rapidly transforming, we need to continue to explore new methods of learning assessment as a response to this societal trend. In addition, new assessment methods are important for enabling a greater number of students to successfully pursue pathways through postsecondary education.

In contrast to these five student-focused issues, Faculty Development and Engagement moved from #3 in 2018 to the #1 position in the 2019 Key Issues survey. This renewed emphasis was characteristic across five of the six institutional types: this issue ranked first in four types (associates, masters, doctoral, and professional schools) and second for the baccalaureate schools. No doubt this is due to the fact that the instructor, though often assisted by instructional and learning professionals, remains the lead in identifying the content and learning goals for a course.

What are we to make of this change? This would appear to be an issue that does not directly take a student perspective. Yet higher education continues to invest heavily in resources to assist the instructor in implementing ever-more-effective learning engagements for the student. These resources include instructional and learning designers, active learning classrooms, centers for teaching and learning, and in many cases, highly visible initiatives to encourage curricular innovation. In this way, the emphasis on faculty engagement by the teaching and learning community does, ultimately, aim to benefit the learner—that is, the student.

When we look at both the EDUCAUSE Top 10 IT Issues survey and the ELI Key Issues in Teaching and Learning survey, perhaps the most significant result is the agreement on the importance of student success and the student experience. In both surveys, issues focusing on students have been moving steadily upward over the last five years. Clearly there are great opportunities for diverse campus organizations, from the IT shop to the center for teaching and learning, to collaborate in addressing our strategic ambitions concerning student success and the student experience.

Notes

5. ELI, “7 Things You Should Know About Open Education”: Content (June 14, 2018); Practices (July 12, 2018); Policies (August 13, 2018).

© 2019 Malcolm Brown. The text of this article is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.