Aligned Insights: *Student Engagement in Post-Secondary*

A strategic approach to improving student support services provides budgetary and reputational benefits

In the current Canadian post-secondary climate of underfunding and adverse government policy at the provincial and federal levels, maintaining a high level of student satisfaction is essential to survival. It affects recruitment and retention rates,[i] alumni giving,[ii] and national and global rankings – all of which can have a profound impact on the bottom line. But when institutions have been finding ways to 'do more with less' for years, the idea of adding more is overwhelming. That's where Aligned Outcomes (AO) can help.

AO has been working with leading institutions to improve student satisfaction without adding costs or overwhelming staff by focusing on *the knowledge gap*. Studies show that access to support services is a key factor in overall student satisfaction,[iii] and yet 60% of students are unaware of the full scope of services available to them.[iv] This knowledge gap is costly, both from the immediate loss from underutilized services and the long-term losses resulting from decreased satisfaction. That's why optimizing access to services is such a powerful approach. AO's Team Enabled Transformation methodology allows us to quickly create an Enterprise Digital Twin of your student support services to identify insights, pinpoint those knowledge gaps, and generate solutions – all uniquely tailored to your organization.

The structure of student support services is unique

Student expectations of what their university provides in terms of support has changed over time, reflected in the wide array of services now available on post-secondary campuses across Canada from academic supports to mental health and medical services to identity-based programs (such as Indigenous resource centres). Many of these services have been added or expanded over time, leading to an organic growth in the processes and systems supporting them.

While an organic approach to growth allows student service teams to be highly adaptive to the needs they see in the student population, over time it leads to inconsistencies in student experience resulting from system inefficiencies, inconsistent communication of services, and a lack of clarity between teams on what is available across campus. The result is that students face difficulties understanding the services available to them and struggle to access those services. In these situations, Aligned Outcomes has found that the answer to student dissatisfaction isn't to provide more, but to simplify systems of access and clearly communicate what is offered. This approach to 'tidy up' existing services provides significant benefit without the resource requirements involved in offering more.

Interconnected services require a specialized approach
There are three key considerations when working to improve interconnected services in post-secondary:

- **Treat the root problem, not the symptoms** – Organic systems grow continuously by focusing on symptoms. This is faster and easier in the short term, but adds further weight to staff and systems in the long term. To make strategic, sustainable, and impactful change, conduct a comprehensive review of the systems and processes underlying the gap or pain area to identify root issues that, when addressed, solve multiple pain points.

- **Focus on improving system implementation** – When existing systems fail to meet our changing needs, the natural inclination is to fill the gap with another tool. To maintain efficient and effective ways of working, focus on making the best use of the systems you already have in place. Benefit from reduced learning time for staff and consistent reporting from unified data.

- **Strategically tackle change so that you're gaining time to work** – With limited resources and already strained staff, build project plans to focus first on initiatives that improve staff workloads so that teams immediately see the positive impact of change and gain the capacity to focus on larger initiatives.

Case Study
Recently, a large Canadian post-secondary engaged Aligned Outcomes (AO) to investigate student dissatisfaction with the online booking system for their health and wellness centre. In a preliminary investigation, the project steering team found that students were dissatisfied with the limited number of appointments available and the inconsistency of appointment communications. To fully understand the cause of these pain points, AO completed a Current State Capture™ to quickly develop an integrated operating model containing the full booking processes, including the systems and all clinic activities that relied on information captured during booking.

This cohesive view supported a root cause analysis that revealed that while students were expressing discontent with the booking software, there were major underlying inefficiencies in system implementation that were artificially reducing the availability of services online and causing an exceptional amount of unnecessary manual work, including 300 hours annually spent just on validating appointments. This human bottleneck was causing the communication issues that students had observed, without serving any meaningful purpose. Conversations with the reception team highlighted the depths of the issue: their phones never stopped ringing, with an average of 45 calls every day just to request appointment cancellations because students struggled to do so through the system. It was clear that change was required at a level deeper than the student-facing aspects of the booking system.

As the health and wellness clinic had added services and process steps over time, they had fixed issues by adding more manual work and new tools rather than asking what their existing technology could do to support them. As a result, they were now working in two separate booking systems, neither of which was meeting their needs at any point in the process. Using the integrated operating model in AO's Enterprise Digital Twin tool, the project steering team was able to clearly see the impact that these system inefficiencies were having on their people and processes. In line with Aligned Outcomes' previous experience, the data showed that consolidating all clinic staff into one of their existing systems and focusing on making better use of that systems would have the greatest positive impact on clinic productivity while massively improving the consistency of the student experience.

Coached by AO, the team strategized on how to implement such a significant change with a staff already operating at capacity. Again using the integrated operating model, AO identified key inefficiencies in the existing system where administrative work could be automated to reduce overall staff workloads. By tackling these areas first, the clinic staff were able to regain time that gave them the capacity they needed to manage the transition of all mental health providers from a specialized client management software to the central clinic system. As they made the transition, mental health providers were able to rely on their medical colleagues' existing knowledge of the system to quickly build their own confidence.

As a result of this work, students can now access all the services provided by the health and wellness centre through a single booking tool, making it easier to quickly see the range of supports available. The time required to book an appointment has been reduced from twenty minutes to five – now able to be completed between classes. Appointment setup within the system has been optimized to better display available appointments so that students can easily access the services that were always available but formerly difficult to find. Appointment communications have been automated, making them a clear and consistent support for students through the booking journey. As an additional win, this simplified booking process enabled the web team to refocus the website on clearly communicating what was available through the clinic rather than coaching them through the confusing maze of finding and accessing support (for more on how developing an operating model supports web redesign projects, see Aligned Insights: Tackling Web Page Proliferation in Post Secondary).

Conclusion

As a key driver in overall student satisfaction, support services should be top of mind for any post-secondary looking for ways to maintain and grow reputation, income, and student loyalty. Given the interconnected nature of these services and the environment of scarcity, institutions need to take a strategic approach focused on identifying and addressing root issues, maximizing the impact of existing systems, and working progressively through change to free up staff capacity. AO is uniquely positioned to guide you through this approach, using the Enterprise Digital Twin to uncover deep insights and quickly assess the impact of transformation on your processes and your bottom line.

Aligned Outcomes™ is a Canadian company that brings the innovation of "Enterprise Digital Twin" technology to solve complex enterprise optimization – fast and with precision. Founded in 2014, AO is powered by skilled coaches, an innovative human-centric method and the application of sophisticated automation. Aligned Outcomes delivers insight, control and savings to leading organizations who are driving growth through digital automation and complex transformation.

[i] QS. No Date. "Why student satisfaction is the key to student recruitment." *QS.com.* Accessed March 4, 2025. https://www.qs.com/insights/articles/why-student-satisfaction-is-the-key-to-student-recruitment/

[ii] Ruffalo Noel Levitz. 2015. "The correlation between college student satisfaction and alumni giving." *Learn.ruffalonl.com*. Accessed March 4, 2025. https://learn.ruffalonl.com/rs/395-EOG-977/images/2015_SatisfactionAlumniGiving.pdf

[iii] EY Canada. 2023. "Why human-centered transformation design is critical for universities." *EY.com*. November 7. Accessed March 4, 2025. https://www.ey.com/en_ca/insights/education/why-human-centered-transformation-design-is-critical-for-universities

[iv] Tyton Partners. 2023. "Driving towards a degree: Closing outcome gaps through student supports." *TytonPartners.com.* July 18. Accessed April 9, 2025. https://tytonpartners.com/driving-toward-a-degree-2023-awareness-belonging-and-coordination/