



# Aligned Insights: *Modeling the Institution- Wide Student Journey*

## **Understanding the student journey means understanding the institution behind it**

Students experience their institution as a single, coherent whole. The systems, processes, and organizational structures behind that institution rarely reflect that reality. Admissions, financial aid, academic advising, faculties, and central administrative units each run their own workflows, own their own technology, and set their own priorities — and when a student moves from one to the next, the seams show. Institutional leaders are increasingly naming this as a top-tier problem: the 2025 EDUCAUSE Top 10 places “smoothing the student journey” among the sector’s most urgent priorities, observing that students who have grown up navigating a single, integrated digital world find that “their experience with disjointed systems in higher education is causing angst.”<sup>1</sup> Even the goal most institutions are working toward — a single point of entry to everything a student needs, the way commercial platforms already offer — remains, for most, aspirational rather than achieved.

Closing that gap starts with recognizing what the student journey actually is. It is not a single channel. Students engage actively — submitting forms, booking appointments, meeting with an advisor — and passively, as their information is routed between systems, summarized in reports, and acted on by staff they never meet. They engage with people and with technology, often within the same task. A consistent experience requires alignment across all of these: a warm, capable advisor cannot fully offset a portal that asks for the same document three times, and a well-built system cannot compensate for two staff members giving a student different answers because they’re working from different information.



Just as important, the friction that shapes a student's experience does not always occur where the student can see it. A process that runs long, a system that fails to pass information downstream, or a policy step that forces a manual workaround pulls staff time and attention away from students even when students never encounter the process itself. These effects compound quietly: capacity that could go toward advising is instead spent reconciling data between two systems that don't talk to each other; a bottleneck three departments upstream produces the delay a student feels in week six. A student journey cannot be fully understood, or meaningfully improved, by looking only at the moments where student and institution meet.

## Seeing the whole system to understand the journey

There are three considerations institutions should keep in mind when working to understand and improve the student journey:

- **Map beyond the touchpoint** – The processes, systems, and staff time behind a student interaction shape that interaction even when they sit well outside it. A complete model of the journey has to include the operational work that supports it, not just the moments a student experiences directly.
- **Treat engagement as one continuous experience** – Active and passive engagement, and engagement with people and with technology, all need to hold together as a single, consistent experience — not four separate ones that happen to occur in sequence.
- **Solve at the level of the institution, not the department** – A unified view of process, people, and technology across the whole institution is what surfaces interdependencies, catches gaps before they become dropped handoffs, and lets improvements travel through the entire system rather than stall at the boundary of wherever the project started



## Case Study

The Faculty of Graduate Studies at a large Canadian university engaged Aligned Outcomes (AO) with a clear mandate: reduce the number of steps a graduate student has to take to complete their degree, and create a simpler, more streamlined experience from admission through graduation. As the central unit responsible for graduate education institution-wide, they were also the ones best positioned to see the problem — and the ones facing the steepest climb to solve it. A centrally-driven, institution-wide change effort is a hard sell to individual faculties, and this one was no exception: the university's 13 faculties were wary that a centralized project would flatten the nuances of their own teaching areas and produce changes that did not actually improve their own operations.

This is precisely the gap AO's Team Enabled Transformation methodology is built to close. Rather than designing change centrally and asking faculties to adopt it, AO business architects met individually with each of the 13 faculties, as well as with the central unit itself, to map their end-to-end processes in full. The result was a current state model of **5,671 activities and more than 34,000 associated data points** spanning every faculty and the central unit. That level of detail surfaced something the central unit had not expected going in: **roughly 80% of these processes were consistent across all 13 faculties**. The concern that had stalled buy-in — that a centralized effort would ignore the real differences between faculties — turned out to apply to a much smaller slice of the operation than anyone had assumed.

That finding reset the shape of the project. The central unit focused its own improvement efforts on the shared 80%, using the current state model to identify six processes internal to the central unit for optimization and two processes for cross-faculty optimization, the latter supported by a working group with representation from every faculty. Alongside this centrally driven work, AO also worked directly with individual faculties to support improvements specific to their own operations — addressing the nuance faculties had been concerned would get lost, using the same model that had just proven how much they had in common.

Over a two-year period covering modelling, analysis, design, and implementation, the university reduced or improved **251 student journey steps** through **388 distinct initiatives**, creating an estimated capacity relief of **14,013 staff hours per year**. These gains showed up as much in how the institution worked as in what it produced: faculties that had entered the project wary of a centralized change effort increasingly began raising and solving problems on their own, and a collaborative community — formed out of the project's working groups — continued meeting regularly so faculties could carry forward what other groups were learning. Staff across the institution described a shift from a reactive posture toward change to a proactive, continuous-improvement one:

*"I'm so grateful people are not only asking us what needs to be improved but we are part of designing the solutions. There are so many things I didn't realize we could just ask — "Why do we do things the way we do?" — it's ok to suggest a better way to get things done."*

*~ Graduate Program Administrator*

*"I was shocked to see how many steps graduate students actually take during their journey with us — it was 3x what I would have expected."*

*~ Faculty Dean*

*"We can see now how we have complicated our processes unnecessarily over years of adding things versus thinking through how we can simplify what we do."*

*~ Graduate Program Director*

The model that made this possible was, in the end, the same one this paper has been describing: a single, unified view of process, people, and technology across the entire institution — not just the central unit that initiated the project, and not just the points where students directly interact with it. It was precisely because AO mapped the



operations behind the journey, faculty by faculty, that the central unit could see where 13 seemingly distinct operations were in fact one shared system, and target its efforts accordingly.

## Conclusion

Students do not experience their institution one department at a time, and understanding their journey requires more than mapping the moments where they interact with it directly. Active and passive engagement, engagement with people and with technology, and the operational strain that builds up well outside a student's view all shape the experience a student ultimately has. The Graduate Student Journey project demonstrates what becomes possible when an institution builds a genuinely unified view of its own operations: interdependencies that would otherwise stay hidden come into focus, effort concentrates where it will do the most good, and improvement travels through the whole system rather than stalling at the edge of a single department. AO's Team Enabled Transformation methodology, and the Enterprise Digital Twin it produces, exist to make that whole-institution view achievable — quickly, and with the buy-in of every group whose work shapes the student experience.

1 Czechowski, Nath, Mark Johnston, Ed Kelty, and Felix Zuniga. 2024. "2025 EDUCAUSE Top 10 #3: Smoothing the Student Journey." EDUCAUSE Review. October 23. Accessed July 22, 2026. <https://er.educause.edu/articles/2024/10/2025-educause-top-10-3-smoothing-the-student-journey>

*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.*

