

The Ada Center

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Organization Story

Technology is everywhere. This is especially true for students in their first year of college. First-year college students need to access multiple computer-based systems in order to complete their financial aid documents, schedule appointments with advisors and counselors, find course and curriculum information, register for classes, sign up for placement tests and other assessments, and access online and virtual classrooms. The ease in which a student is able to navigate these systems depends on whether the institution's technology is user friendly to students and staff. In other words, the institution's technology ecosystem has to be coherent, efficient, and people friendly. This is where The Ada Center comes in.

Founded in 2017 by Sarah Zauner, The Ada Center partners with colleges and universities, state entities, and national organizations to help higher education institutions better utilize technology to support student success and equity. In varying capacities, The Ada Center has worked with hundreds of state education systems, community colleges, and access-focused universities on a range of technology-related issues, focusing on supporting students as they progress through developmental and gateway education courses.

The first step in The Ada Center's work with higher education institutions is usually a Student Success Technology Opportunity Assessment. The assessment looks at all the digital ways students interact with an institution and how that data is stitched together for advisors, faculty members, and leaders. With some institutions, the Center conducts in-depth interviews with students, who are either in developmental education or are enrolled in corequisite support courses, to understand specific technology usage strategies that contribute to student engagement, learning, and success. At the culmination of the assessment, The Ada Center makes specific recommendations about how the institution can better leverage software tools to strengthen student outcomes and helps institutions chart a path for executing these recommendations.

The Ada Center also supports state leaders with technology decisions, especially those that pertain to developmental and first-year student success. For example, The Ada Center is currently working with the Ohio Online Success Center (OOSC) and the Ohio Association of Community Colleges (OACC) to capture student perspectives on the virtualization of Ohio colleges' Guided Pathways work. During the summer of 2020, The Ada Center conducted in-depth student interviews across the state, seeking to understand the technology-related activities, features, and capabilities most important for student engagement and learning. The interviews prioritized the inclusion of students taking critical developmental or gatekeeper courses and those from racially minoritized student groups.

Policy-Related Overview

Technology plays an important role in developmental education because many of the new developmental education models rely on some aspect of technology to implement or sustain. Now with COVID-19 as the new normal, the effective use of technology becomes even more important. For example, the change in modality with corequisite courses from in person to online will have significant impacts on student success. Student success elements such as learning, engagement, connection, and belonging are all impacted when courses migrate online. For students in developmental education, replicating these elements in an online setting is key to the student's success in these courses.

The Ada Center's in-depth interviews with college and university students have been helpful to understanding technology-related factors for success. In recent student interviews, The Ada Center has focused on how faculty can use technology to promote student learning and engagement, especially in critical gateway and developmental education courses. For example, what types of strategies for Learner Management System usage help students in developmental math courses stay on track? What types of activities and tools should faculty use during the synchronous portion of the class to increase peer-to-peer interaction and student learning? How often should faculty members provide information to the student so the student feels in control of the class schedule and course content?

The Ada Center shared some early learnings from student interviews conducted nationally across summer 2020. For example, as students have grown more accustomed to learning online, their expectations for effective online pedagogy have risen. Students are now more inclined to register for classes taught by instructors who have a track record of effectively using videoconferencing, learning management systems, and communication technologies like Slack and Discord. Higher education institutions can improve student enrollment and retention in online classes by training faculty in these technologies and communicating to students (via the course catalog or otherwise) on how these technologies will be employed.

Zauner acknowledges that there are big "knotty" issues related to technology that colleges and universities need to address. However, this is what she finds most exciting about the work: "As a former educator, I get excited about being part of a field that's making big changes. There's active evolution with respect to how technology can contribute —and how it can't contribute— to success, learning, and equity goals."

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