

Driving Student Persistence with Timely, Personalized Faculty Support

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[Jennie]

Hello! Thank you for joining us today. I know something about you because you're here, engaging in a session about improving student persistence and personalizing support. I know that you care about students. I know that you want to see more students, especially those who face systemic barriers, develop their potential, complete their degrees, and for those degrees to open pathways of opportunity for them. You wouldn't be here otherwise. My guess is you would describe yourself as "student-centered". Me, too.

Our Vision: A Truly Student-Centered Community of Care



At WGU, our vision is to be the most innovative, student-centric university. Now, people often agree on the sentiment of student-centricity, students are at the heart of what we do, but what does that mean in practice? As one professor said to me, "it means having teaching be at least 20% of my evaluation and only 80% research". Ok... Some describe it as helping students better navigate a complex, confusing system. That's commendable and important work. At WGU, when we say "student-centered", we mean that we have put the student at the center of our design, our processes, and our practices such that the "system" is able to adapt to the student, rather than insisting on the reverse. In the words of our president, Scott Pulsipher, "we want every student at WGU to feel like the university was built just for them."

Of course, that's not easy to do, and our journey to get there is a work in progress. It started in earnest a few years ago when our team was formed and began collaborating with faculty and college leaders to develop, implement, and improve upon a variety of tools and processes designed around the student to create a truly student-centered community of care. Today, we'll share how we went about it and the encouraging results so far, as well as point to a few ways our experience may be helpful to you.

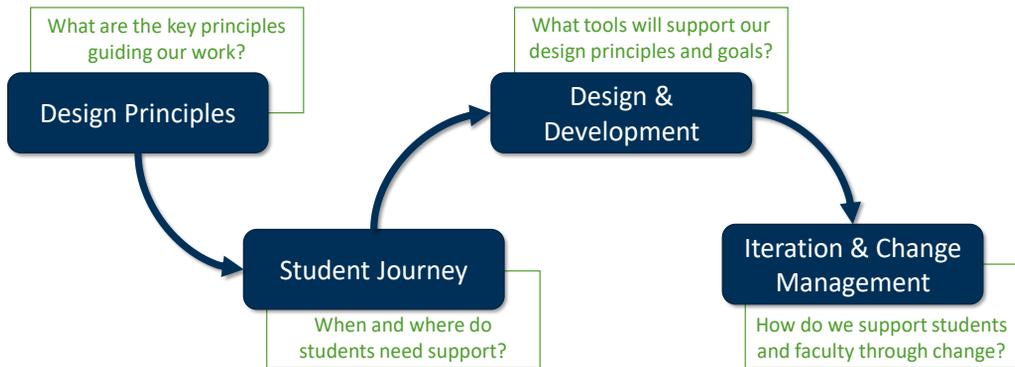


This slide has animation! The photos & data show first, and on click the graduation data appear.

Over the past two years, these strategies have helped us, on average, retain 50 more students per month after failing an assessment; help 200 more first-term students per month successfully complete all their first term courses; and 200 more students per month returned for a second term.

These milestones matter because they show students making progress toward graduation, [animation] and we indeed saw a record number of graduates in the class of 2021—more than 49,000 students, an increase of 16% compared to the class of 2020, and a 2.5% increase in on-time graduation compared to 2020. This was remarkable given what our students, and all of us, have experienced over the past 18 months.

Our Process



So, how did we go about this? We started with some key design principles that focused us on the student journey, centering the student as the guiding force for all of our decisions. We looked at the whole journey for each of our students, identifying those places where our students would most benefit from timely, personalized faculty support, and designing our tools and processes to address those support needs. We also placed great emphasis on learning, iteration, and supporting faculty and students through these changes, recognizing that a culture of learning doesn't just apply to students learning their course material.

As we work through the session, we'll share how we approached each of these different components of development and implementation, and we'll also provide opportunities for you to reflect on how the information might apply at your institution.

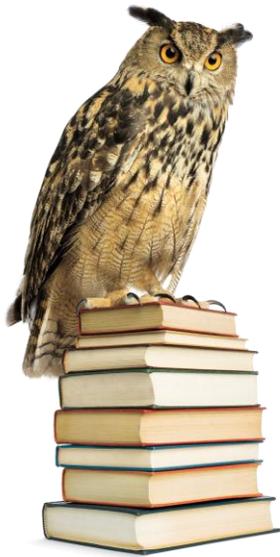


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What do you
hope to gain
from this session?



Of course, we want to make sure this session has value for you. So, if you wouldn't mind—in the chat, please share briefly what you are hoping to take away from this session. As much as possible, we'll make sure to highlight key information that might be helpful depending on what you all are looking for.

[allow time for responses and highlight a few key items]

Identifying Our Design Principles

Design Principles

Student Journey

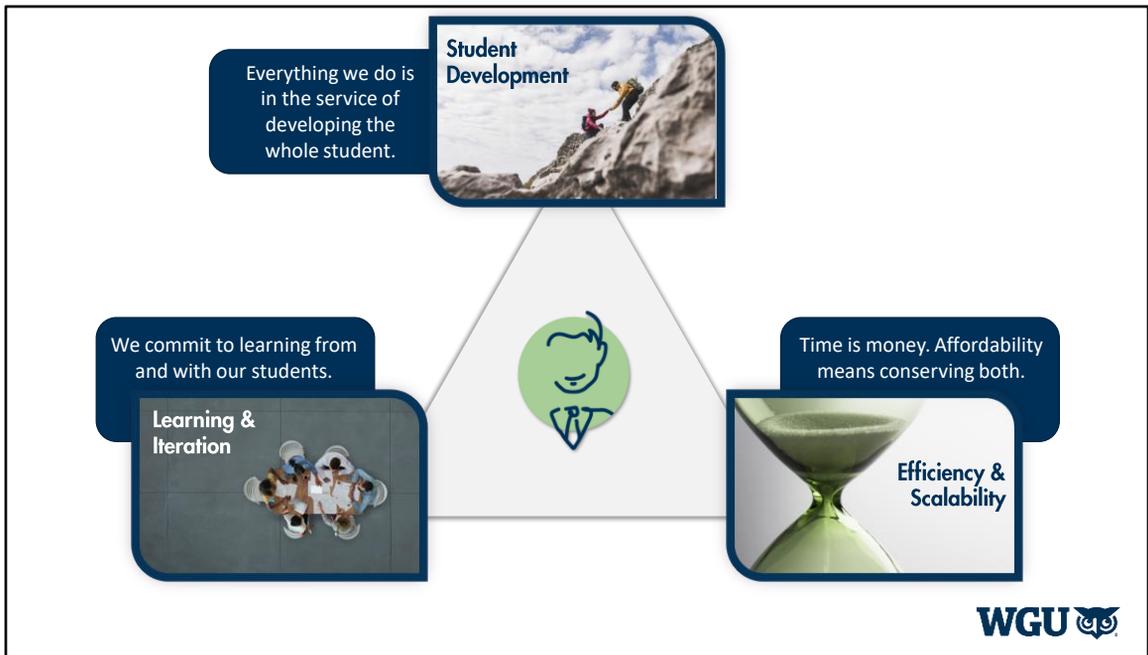
Design & Development

Iteration & Change Management

Kikuyu
College of Business

WGU 

When we began work on this project several years ago, we started by identifying the key principles that would guide our work. These design principles are the touchstones we return to as we encounter new decisions, challenges, and needs, and they help us stay on track.



this slide has animations! the three principles are visible on launching the slide, and the explanations appear as animations with each click: student development first, then efficiency, then learning & iteration.

To us, being student-centered doesn't just mean helping students pass their courses; we recognize the inherent worth of every individual, and our role in helping each student develop as a whole person. We recognize that a degree is about more than just academic success; it also includes developing skills for personal and professional growth and success. So, one of our most critical design principles during this work has been to [first animation] center everything we do around supporting the whole student. This includes explicitly addressing academic, personal, and career skills and needs and resources throughout our work.

We also recognize that college is an investment, often a significant one. Our students trust us to be responsible stewards of their tuition dollars as well as their time and energy. We recognize that we can't truly achieve our goal of affordability [second animation] without ensuring our tools, processes, and procedures are as efficient and scalable as possible. For example, as we design new tools, we ensure they are accessible from where faculty and students spend most of their time so they don't

have to add one more platform or site to their routine. We have also placed emphasis on automation, surfacing key data without the need for manual searching or tracking.

Finally, we believe that to be truly student-centered, we need to view our students as partners, valuing their insights and needs and learning with and from them as we grow. [third animation] So, we explicitly centered learning and iteration in our designs and processes. We incorporate regular analysis, feedback, and updates into our processes, and we ensure faculty and students are both represented in design and enhancement discussions.



What would be some design principles for your institution?

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Take a moment to consider your institution's vision, mission, and goals. What might be some key design principles you would recommend for your institution in pursuing more timely, personalized support for students?

[allow time for responses and highlight a few key items]

Defining Our Student Journey

Design Principles

**Student
Journey**

Design &
Development

Iteration & Change
Management

Jacqueline
College of Health Professions

WGU 

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Our design principles provided focus and touchstones as we considered the complete journey of a student, from enrollment to graduation, identifying tender moments where we had opportunities to improve the consistency, timing, or personalization of support from faculty and other student services.

Think about the student journey at your institution.
At which point(s) would your students most benefit from more consistent, timely, and personalized support from faculty and student services?

- A. planning which course(s) to take/understanding how to get started
- B. building competency within the course/struggling with course material
- C. writing papers and reports, preparing for exams
- D. remediation after an unsuccessful assessment or assignment
- E. applying learning to career/professional contexts
- F. developing non-course-specific academic skills (writing, study skills, etc.)
- G. developing personal/non-academic skills (perseverance, goal-setting, etc.)



[after poll is complete] Obviously all of these moments are important, and students can benefit from personalized support at any or all of these points. As we considered the approach we wanted to take, we recognized that we would have better outcomes with an iterative or agile approach, so we chose to focus on just a few key points at first.

Our Focus: Initial Implementation



Personal &
Academic Skills



Course
Planning



Assessment
Remediation



For our initial implementation, we identified three key journey points that we wanted to focus on, taking into consideration student need, feasibility within our existing architecture, and alignment with our long-term goals as an institution.

First, we recognize that our students aren't just students—they're also friends, parents, spouses, caregivers, employees, and partners. We know they don't come to WGU just to get a degree, but to advance their career and make a better life for them and their families. Without a recognition of the needs of the "whole student", we can't appropriately support them and help them to succeed. So, one area of focus during this initial work was on identifying and supporting student development in academic, personal, and professional skills, such as time management, goal setting, technology use, and reading comprehension.

WGU is a competency-based university: students complete their courses when they demonstrate competency, regardless of "seat time." In other words, a student might complete a course in one day, a week, or four months—depending on how much competency they already have in the course content as well as non-academic life factors such as study time and support from their family. Because the duration of a course can vary, it's critical that students have realistic expectations for how much

effort each course will take for them. When they have this clear picture and personalized plan for their term, they are more successful. Therefore, course and term planning was another key journey point we emphasized during our initial work.

Finally, we know that not passing an assessment or having a paper sent back for revision can be discouraging and demotivating for students, and that many students lose momentum when they encounter this type of hurdle. This also tends to be a time when personalized, supportive outreach from a faculty member can make a world of difference, so we also chose to focus on assessment remediation during our initial implementation.

Designing and Developing Our Tools

Student Journey

Design Principles

Design & Development

Iteration & Change Management

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Teachers College

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Starting with our design principles and applying them to these three key journey points, we worked to create a set of new tools to help us move toward a more student-centered approach to faculty support.



Personal &
Academic Skills

Personal Learning Guide



Course
Planning

Course Planning Tools



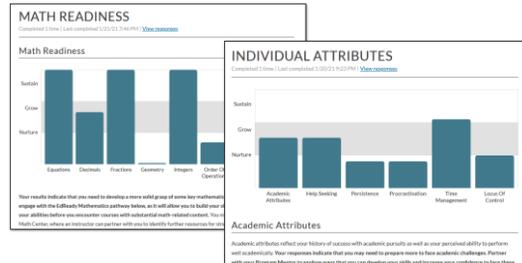
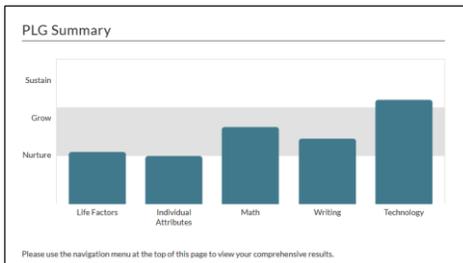
Assessment
Remediation

Learner Care Dashboard



We'll focus on three specific tools today, addressing each of the key journey points we identified.

Personal Learning Guide



Completed during new student orientation or any time during the program

Highlights student academic and personal skills and opportunities

Provides resources and strategies



To support the development of the whole student, including skills for personal, professional, and academic success, we developed the personal learning guide, or PLG. Students complete the PLG as part of their new student orientation, and the results are available to them and their faculty immediately.

The personal learning guide includes questions related to academic skills, such as writing and math, as well as personal factors that influence academic success, such as time management, study skills, personal support networks, and motivation for pursuing a degree. When the student completes the personal learning guide, they receive personalized resource recommendations based on their results. Their faculty also see coaching suggestions for each section to help them provide a more nuanced support for the student.

Course Planning Tools



Completed during term planning process

Gives insight into student knowledge, experience, confidence for each course



WGU 

To help students collaborate more effectively with faculty and set realistic expectations for course pacing and effort, we developed course planning tools. During the term planning process, students complete a course planning tool for each course they are considering for the term. The results of the tool help the student and their faculty estimate the level of effort and time the student is likely to need to complete the course, and they also give students a preview of the kinds of skills and knowledge they will be expected to demonstrate to complete the course. One important feature of these tools is that they do not ask only about course content; aligned with our focus on student development, they also include questions about the student's experience and confidence in the course. Their answers on these questions help them and their faculty identify appropriate support and resources for completing the course.

Learner Care Dashboard

ACTION	STUDENT NAME	REASON	COURSE CODE	DATE ADDED TO LIST	TOTAL DAYS	TERM PROGRESS	EVENT PROGRESS	FOLLOW-UP NOTES	FOLLOW-UP DATE	INTERVENTION
	Michael Jackson	7 Days To Planned Course Start	C779	08/17/2021		Day 16: 0 CUs Completed	To Do			Discuss planned course
	Jared Lewis	No Program Mentor Contact in 14 Days	C963	08/17/2021	14	Day 47: 3 CUs Completed	To Do			Contact student to offer
	Ryan Jackson	PM - Student Not Academically Engaged for 15 Days		08/17/2021	15	Day 47: 0 CUs Completed	To Do			Call student to offer sup
	Rachel Harris	PM - Student Not Academically Engaged for 15 Days		08/17/2021	15	Day 108: 0 CUs Completed	To Do			Call student to offer sup
	Dylan Jones	Student Passed Objective Assessment	C393	08/16/2021						
	John Harris	Student Failed Objective Assessment	C176	08/16/2021						
	Milton Brown	Student Failed Preassessment	C859	08/16/2021						
	Asher James	7 Days To Planned Course Start	C849	08/16/2021						
	Nico Gonzalez	7 Days To Planned Course Start	C859	08/14/2021						
	Abraham Williams	7 Days To Planned Course Start	C480	08/14/2021						

Faculty notifications triggered at key points in the student journey

Enable analysis of impact of faculty response on student persistence

Aligned with our focus on assessment remediation, we developed the learner care dashboard, which surfaces notifications to faculty of students who need support after an unsuccessful assessment attempt. WGU's competency-based model makes this type of tool especially important—because students work through courses at different paces, they may complete assessments at any time. Without this type of notification, therefore, faculty would need to spend time manually sorting and searching their assigned students for recent assessment attempts. By surfacing this information proactively, we provide a more efficient process for faculty and ensure more timely support for students.

Another important feature of these faculty notifications is that they allow us to collect more robust, useable data about how and when faculty are interacting with students. For the first time, we have been able to establish service-level agreements or SLAs for our faculty. These SLAs are not used as performance metrics or for punitive purposes, but instead help us evaluate how the timing of faculty support affects student persistence and success. SLAs also help establish consistent expectations for faculty support.

What resources, tools,
and platforms could
support personalization
at your institution?



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What we're hoping you take away from this is that while the specifics might be different at your institution, there are some consistent, general principles and practices that you can apply to help your faculty provide more student-centered support in your own community of care. Think about the infrastructure and resources at your institution. What options do you think are available to you to support personalization at your institution?

[allow time for responses and highlight a few key items]

Initial Implementation and Results

Student Journey

Design Principles

Design & Development

Iteration & Change Management

Aaron
College of IT

WGU 

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What we've presented here today is just the first steps that we're taking toward this student-centered, personalized approach. As we've mentioned, we've built iteration and learning into every part of our process.

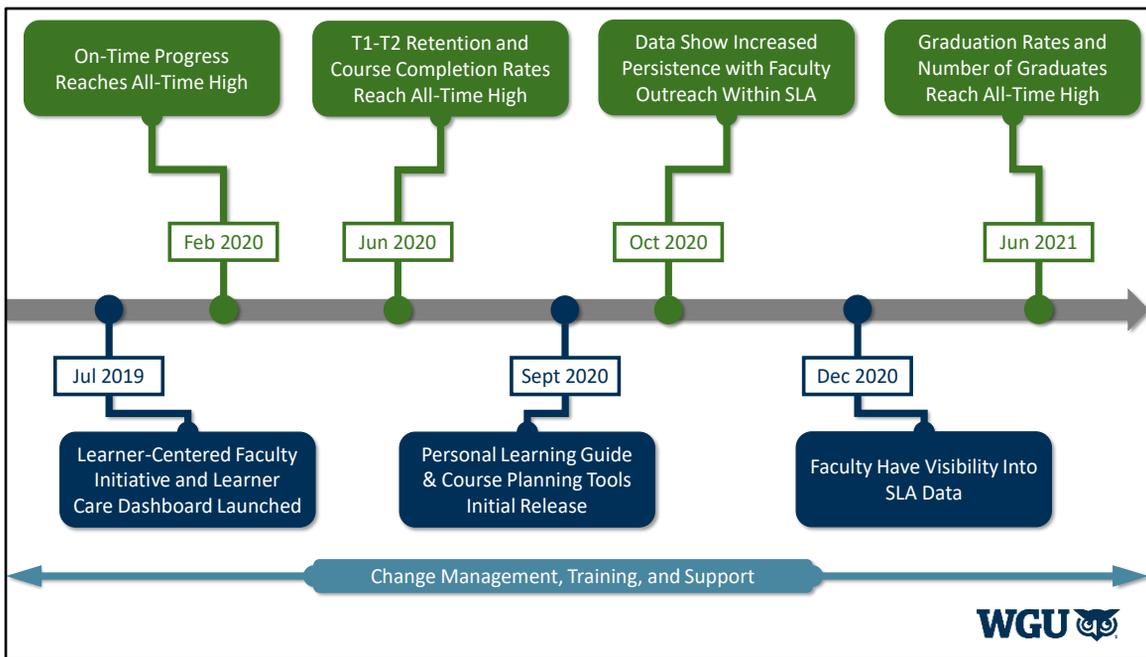
What do you think would be the **most challenging** barrier to implementing this type of approach at your institution?

- A. technology infrastructure
- B. diversity of student population & needs
- C. buy-in from institutional leadership
- D. buy-in from faculty/staff
- E. something else



Before we share some of our early results and learnings, consider taking this type of approach at your institution. What do you think would be the single biggest challenge?

[review common answers—will most likely be A, C, or D—and then use those results to highlight/emphasize specific pieces on the results slide]



This slide has animation! The slide will start with only the timeline & dates showing.

We first launched this initiative a little over two years ago, in mid-2019. [first animation] That initial launch included the learner care dashboard and focused training for faculty on personalization and support for students, but did not include the course planning tools or personal learning guide, which were still being developed. A little more than a year later, last September [second animation] we released the initial versions of course planning tools and the personal learning guide. Then, at the end of last year [third animation], we were able to make SLA data visible to faculty in real-time. This allowed them to see not just their own, but their peers' alignment with the various SLAs so they can more effectively collaborate and share best practices.

Now clearly the past 18 months has brought with it many unanticipated challenges and opportunities. In fact, some of these releases were delayed due to the impacts of the pandemic. But even with those impacts, we are seeing some very promising outcomes, suggesting our work is really having an impact.

[fourth animation] in February 2020, before pandemic effects were widespread and

after a full term of learner-centered faculty support—WGU terms are six months long—our overall on-time progress reached an all-time high. Students who make on-time progress have completed the required minimum number of courses in their term to remain enrolled in good standing; this is equivalent to a standard course load at a non-competency-based institution. While we can't determine causality at this point, the timing here is highly suggestive that the changes implemented in July of 2019 played a role in this high level of on-time progress.

Many institutions have experienced challenges in student outcomes during the pandemic, and WGU is no exception. Because most of our students are working adults with children, some of the pandemic impacts have been more intensely felt—for example, many of our students are front-line nurses and teachers or other education professionals, who have had significant stress and impacts as the pandemic has continued. Despite these challenges, however, we have seen a number of promising signs indicating that our focus on personalization and timely support is helping our students succeed, even during these challenging times. In June of last year [5th animation], we recorded all-time high retention and course completion rates. By October [6th animation], we had the first of our analyses in hand demonstrating that faculty outreach based on notifications in the learner care dashboard is associated with significant increases in student persistence—as much as 6-7% in some cases. And this past June [7th animation], we celebrated our largest-ever graduating class—more than 49,500 students! Our two- and four-year graduation rates continue to outpace those of other open-access institutions.

Many of you mentioned that buy-in from leadership and/or faculty would likely be a barrier to implementation of this type of approach at your institution, and we anticipated some challenges in that area as well. Throughout this process [last animation], we have provided robust change management, communication, training, and support. Through this intentional focus, we have been able to address faculty and leader concerns quickly, offer course corrections, and effectively learn and iterate.



What are you going to do next?

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[allow time for responses and highlight a few key items]



Thank you!

What questions can we
answer today?

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WGU

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