



Answers at Their Fingertips

Building a Front Porch Portal for
Centralized Student Support

Commissioned by



In Partnership with



Produced by



About the Organizations



Ed Advancement is a national nonprofit dedicated to advancing socioeconomic mobility by strengthening mission-focused colleges and universities, including historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), that serve low-income, first-generation, and historically under-resourced students. Through deep institutional partnerships, strategic capacity building, and operational and technology-based solutions, Ed Advancement works collaboratively with higher education leaders, philanthropy, and other partners to improve enrollment, retention, and graduation outcomes while supporting long-term institutional sustainability. Since 2018, Ed Advancement has worked alongside more than 70 colleges and universities in 19 states and the District of Columbia, serving nearly 300,000 students.



For more than 20 years, Whiteboard Advisors has collaborated with the most transformative organizations, individuals and investors in education. Our diverse team of educators, wonks and storytellers brings in-depth understanding of policy, technology and practice to bear on cutting-edge research, powerful writing, and the design of communications and advocacy campaigns that challenge the status quo. Whether we're working with startups or the most established organizations in education, we're passionate about taking breakthrough ideas to scale.

axim collaborative

Axim Collaborative is a nonprofit organization co-founded by Harvard and MIT that transforms education-to-work pathways by investing in innovative partnerships to ensure every student can thrive in a changing economy. Axim uses catalytic funding to foster collaborative partnerships, build capacity and scale innovations to strengthen pathways that improve outcomes for millions of learners. These pathways engage students in their course of study, enable them to persist through their programs and prepare them to excel in their careers.

About the Authors

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INTRODUCTION

Clear, timely communication with students tightly relates to student enrollment, matriculation, persistence and graduation. Yet, many institutions struggle to balance the high volume of information with highlighting the most critical information when it comes to student communication. In the vast sea of messages, the most urgent ones often get lost.

“There are many ways our students receive communication,” says Dr. Alexis Brooks-Walter, vice president of student affairs and enrollment at Virginia State University. “Especially for an incoming student, it can be slightly overwhelming. [This can] prevent them from receiving the information they need.”

With so much to share and a growing expectation from students to be able to access information at any time of day, many colleges and universities have turned to online apps, platforms, or other solutions to provide on-demand resources.

But for many students, these well-intentioned investments have produced an unintended result: a fragmented digital experience that makes it harder, instead of easier, to find what they need. “Anytime, anywhere” access is a compelling value proposition for institutional leaders seeking to meet student expectations, but access alone is no longer enough if students cannot easily find, understand, and act on the information they need.

Information about financial aid, academic progress, campus events, advising, housing, and dining is often spread across multiple platforms. And students may not know where to find the information they need — or that it’s available online in the first place.

Students’ Insights from Focus Groups on Three Campuses

“ I’m very heavily involved with campus life, so a lot of events we post don’t really get seen because people are not on social media. There are a lot of things that are going on around campus that people don’t know about.

“ It was a pain in the butt. It was so hard to find stuff that I needed. Like, how much do I owe in loans? What are my grades? What’s my GPA so I can apply for internships?

“ [Using the school’s student information system interface] was very tedious ... it was very confusing ... if you want students to go where you want them to go and do what you want them to do, you have to make it accessible.

“ You have to go through a lot of different links, and it takes you to different pages. That’s time-consuming — and often we are on a time crunch. So, it’s very complicated finding certain things.

It's a challenge that institutions of all types and sizes face. While serving as associate vice president of student registration and financial services at the University of Pennsylvania, Matt Sessa, now chief operating officer at Ed Advancement, dreamed of creating a digital "one stop shop" for students.

"We had the framework for something that looked a lot like the Front Porch Portal on a whiteboard in my office for a long time," Sessa explains. "My team and I knew it would be beneficial for students, but even with our relatively well-funded department, we didn't have the extra capacity to build it ourselves. Even institutions with significant advantages grapple with both fragmented systems for student support and the limitations of creating something new in-house."

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Matt Sessa | Chief Operating Officer at Ed Advancement

A GROWING STUDENT BODY; A GROWING NEED

Historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) have largely bucked broader higher education trends in the post-pandemic era, increasing their enrollment even as other institutions have faced declines. Between 2020 and 2021, colleges and universities across the United States [saw a nearly 20% decline](#) in enrollment; however, HBCUs saw a [nearly 10% increase](#) across the pandemic and post-pandemic years.

Several of Ed Advancement's partner institutions — including two that have supported development of the Front Porch Portal — have made particularly strong gains. Virginia State University has seen its enrollment grow by nearly 40% since 2020; South Carolina State University has seen a 35% increase in enrollment over the last five years, one of the fastest rates of growth in South Carolina.

But enrollment is only the beginning: Institutions must effectively support the influx of new students from matriculation to graduation. Serving a larger student body requires institutions to seek efficiencies to ensure every student has the information they need and the experience they sought when choosing an HBCU.

The need for increased capacity to serve students adds urgency to institutional efforts (often already underway) to digitize analog processes. It also surfaces new areas ripe for transformation. Processes that were manageable with smaller student populations, like paper-based applications to transfer to a new major, may begin to feel unsustainable with a larger student body. Similarly, word-of-mouth or paper-based approaches to publicizing campus events may be less effective as the number of students rapidly rises, leading student groups to seek new ways to reach peers.



THE CHALLENGE: GIVING STUDENTS ANSWERS AT THEIR FINGERTIPS

Even as institutions consider their own technological needs, they also work diligently to meet students' expectations.

For a generation of digital natives accustomed to instant, 24/7 access to information on their smartphones, legacy processes of in-person visits to administrative offices on campus can feel like an unnecessary hurdle. At Virginia State University, President Makola Abdullah recognized the opportunity to give students what they want: answers at their fingertips.

"Students expect timely, seamless access to information and may perceive slow responses or gaps in communication as a lack of care," President Abdullah explains. "With classes and other academic commitments filling their schedules, we want students to be able to access answers and services from their phones, at any time and from anywhere."

The best way for institutions to communicate with students clearly, President Abdullah believes, has to be through the device that connects them to all other services in their lives: their cellphones.

Virginia State University had already partnered with Ed Advancement on several other successful projects, including the implementation of the Slate customer relationship management (CRM) platform, when President Abdullah approached Ed Advancement with an ambitious goal: Students should be able to "access everything on their phones [and] do everything they need to do at Virginia State University using their mobile device." The concept led to an institution-driven design process — and eventually the launch of the Front Porch Portal.

THE SOLUTION: THE FRONT PORCH PORTAL, A WELCOMING ENTRY FOR STUDENTS

The Front Porch Portal pulls together information from a wide range of systems to offer a single, central interface for students. More than just reducing administrative friction, the Front Porch Portal helps students take action by reminding them of upcoming deadlines or helping them schedule needed appointments.

“We know students use their phones for everything,” says Dr. Manicia Finch, vice president of enrollment management at South Carolina State University. “So, why not fix it so they can use their phones to access pertinent information about the university and keep themselves accountable for what they need to be doing to move forward in their educational pursuit?”

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Built on top of Ed Advancement’s customized Slate CRM, Front Porch Portal provides students with a user-friendly way to quickly access their schedule, grades, housing information, financial aid, and more. Through one sign-on, students can see personalized academic and financial information, key tasks and deadlines, and campus events.



Source:

Alerts at the top of the page help students see and prioritize timely tasks, notifying them of missing paperwork, student holds, or other issues that might prevent them from on-time registration for courses. And links to campus resources allow them to easily schedule tutoring, advising, or other support sessions. “The most useful part of Front Porch [is] having direction — knowing where to go to handle specific issues and having contact information and phone numbers for [different offices on campus]. It can save so much hassle,” one junior noted.

Students involved in feedback and design sessions frequently noted the value of the financial aid section of the Front Porch Portal in particular. One junior pointed out that the Front Porch Portal offers quick answers to key questions about aid and loan balances, providing a convenient alternative to visiting the financial aid office, which she shared was often busy and a little difficult for her to reach. Another student mentioned a close call he could have avoided with Front Porch Portal: Once, he forgot to sign the necessary paperwork for financial aid, and he would have missed a payment had his institution not called him. But, he said, “the Front Porch has these [financial] notifications in bright red, so I wouldn’t have been able to miss it if we had the [Front Porch] earlier on.”

The Front Porch can play an important role giving students access to relevant news, resources and crucial updates. Dr. Finch likens it to “a help desk right at students’ fingertips.”

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Junior



Yet, the value of the Front Porch Portal isn't limited to its self-service nature. For faculty and advisors, Front Porch Portal offers an easy way to quickly see all the information they need to support a student. And by empowering students with the information they need to be self-sufficient, Front Porch Portal can significantly lighten administrative staff's loads. Virginia State University anticipates that the Front Porch Portal could, over time, cut the 20,000 calls to its campus call center by up to 50%.

ROOTED IN STUDENT EXPECTATIONS, REFINED BY STUDENT FEEDBACK

Just as important as what the Front Porch Portal does is how it was developed. Ed Advancement took both a top-down and bottom-up approach to designing the Front Porch Portal, gathering insights from institutional leaders across functional areas on the data they felt students most needed to access as well as capturing student opinions on what they'd like to see. The initial discovery phase included representatives from a wide range of institutions, providing insights into the types of data most likely to be both useful and available. Early discovery work also focused on identifying common barriers that students face that may create roadblocks to graduation — barriers that students could overcome with better access to timely insights.

Student feedback sessions highlighted the limitations of existing platforms, including clunky user experience and a lack of clarity on which information resides in which platform. Students consistently emphasized the value of simplicity, mobile access, and relevance — priorities that shaped the Front Porch Portal's functionality and interface. One sophomore said, "Front Porch helps because I'm a visual person. I clicked it, and I could instantly see my [loan] payments. And plus, it's easier to navigate than [Student Information System (SIS)]." A student at a different institution noted "this interface is much more user-friendly than what we currently have."



In one on-campus design session, 10 out of 10 students agreed that having important information in a single platform would be something they would use regularly. And students across multiple campuses shared that they feel the portal will be particularly valuable for incoming students. “I’m jealous!” said one student. “We didn’t have this my freshman year and now I’m about to leave, but at least I’m paying it forward.”

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Student

Student sessions also surfaced additional data elements or information that students reported being unable to access easily online, including cafeteria menus and information about campus events. While these data points didn’t rise to the top of the list for the institutional staff considering which data points connect most directly with student success, they play a powerful role in making the Front Porch Portal valuable for students. While financial aid status or GPA may change only a few times a year, cafeteria menus and campus events are everyday needs, turning the Front Porch Portal into a daily destination rather than a quarterly one.

Affordable, Accessible and Flexible Solution

Because it’s a layer built on top of the Slate CRM, Front Porch Portal comes with no ongoing software licensing costs for institutions already using Slate. It’s also relatively flexible and customizable: Each institution can modify the mobile-first interface, offering the feel of a custom-built app without the cost.

In addition, Ed Advancement worked with institutions to create an implementation process that combines pre-work and on-campus sessions with campus leadership and IT to build on existing data and technology systems. These changes from the initial implementation process have significantly minimized work for partner institutions. Ed Advancement has reduced the installation time of the Front Porch Portal’s core templates to a few days and the generalized timeline for full product setup to three months from start to finish.

Ed Advancement’s Technology Hub, led by vice president Nick Cheng, continually improved processes across multiple implementations, with a particular focus on the role of institutions. “We thought a lot about implementation,” says Cheng. “One of our goals was to get the lift on the school’s part as light as humanly possible.”

Limiting Reliance on Technical Staff

Front Porch Portal, once configured on a campus, is relatively easy for staff members to modify. Many elements of the Front Porch Portal are pulled from spreadsheets or other resources that staff members across functional areas, from housing to financial aid, can modify without relying on the campus IT teams.

“We’re taking thin slices of data that represent areas of the whole student experience out from a large number of data systems,” explains Cheng. “We’ve worked hard to simplify the data integrations. Our templates focus on just the most critical elements, and we’ve made it such that

functional users of systems on campus — not just the IT staff — can provide the data we need, and then we just work with IT to automate those processes.”

Given that HBCUs (alongside community colleges and other less affluent institutions) often operate with lean IT teams, offering a technology solution that is user-friendly for students while also easy for nontechnical staff to update is valuable.

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Nick Cheng | Vice President of Ed Advancement’s Technology Hub

From Pilot to Product

Front Porch Portal, which started as a wish list item from a college president and took shape as a small pilot, is now fully formed as a replicable product.

The Ed Advancement team has developed a streamlined implementation process, refined through the initial pilot phases. The result is faster time to installation and more efficient use of campus staff time. By knowing what questions to ask and gathering resources in advance of a campus visit, the Ed Advancement team incorporated 70% of the content for South Carolina State University’s Front Porch Portal before any in-person working sessions began.

This efficiency is particularly impressive given the breadth of departments involved. Across implementations, the Ed Advancement team has developed a process for coordinating with campus offices from financial aid, to enrollment, to student affairs and advising.

Looking Forward

The future of student success will not be defined solely by access to higher education, but by how effectively institutions guide students through it. And as HBCUs continue to see rising enrollment and growing student expectations, the question is no longer whether information is available but whether it’s usable.

Built on existing infrastructure and grounded in both student voice and institutional need, the Front Porch Portal offers a low-cost, low-lift solution for institutions and provides students with the ease of use they expect, removing unnecessary friction and helping guide them toward important actions that will support persistence and graduation.

Front Porch Portal continues to scale across new institutions, demonstrating its flexibility in fitting a range of campus contexts and needs.

Technology alone is not the solution to improving student success. But thoughtfully designed technology — rooted in student expectations, informed by student feedback and aligned with institutional priorities — can be a powerful enabler. If higher education is to fulfill its promise — especially for first-generation and underrepresented students — we must continue designing systems that make success accessible from matriculation to graduation.