

Achieving Meaningful Student Success

Student retention has become a top priority among Higher Education administrators in recent years, particularly in light of the current economic climate. The benefits of even small increases in retention include enhanced reputation, lower recruitment costs, and the protection of tuition revenue for universities and colleges. While the value of raising retention rates is well understood, Higher Education institutions often struggle to advance the completion agenda on their campuses. In fact, despite the extensive press and research devoted to the topic, retention rates have remained relatively constant over the last fifty years (Mortenson, 2012).

In the UK only 1 in 12 students, or 8%, leave Higher Education during their first year of study, but surveys undertaken by What Works? project teams across four institutions found that between 33% and 42% of students think about withdrawing from Higher Education” (Thomas, 2012). This finding demonstrates that a significant minority of students consider withdrawal. Rectifying this should be a priority for all programmes, departments, and institutions.

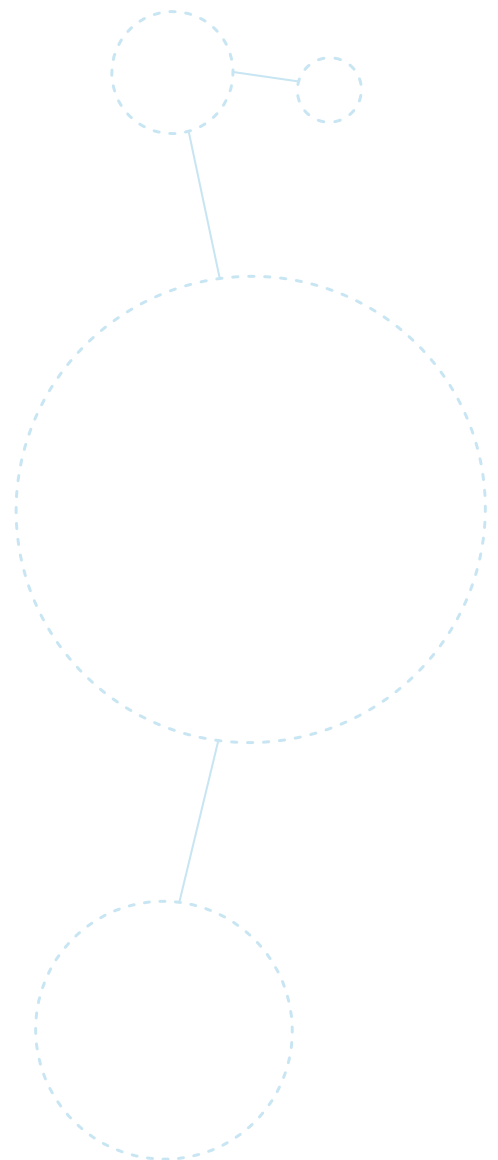
In order to support broader student success, this paper will examine best practices from effective retention initiatives and offer guidelines for administrators. Our research has shown that effective programs generally include institution-specific definitions of student success, robust metrics and assessment methodologies to track progress over time, predictive modeling to identify factors that may place students at risk, effective alert systems coupled with timely interventions, and leadership support to drive campus-wide support and participation.

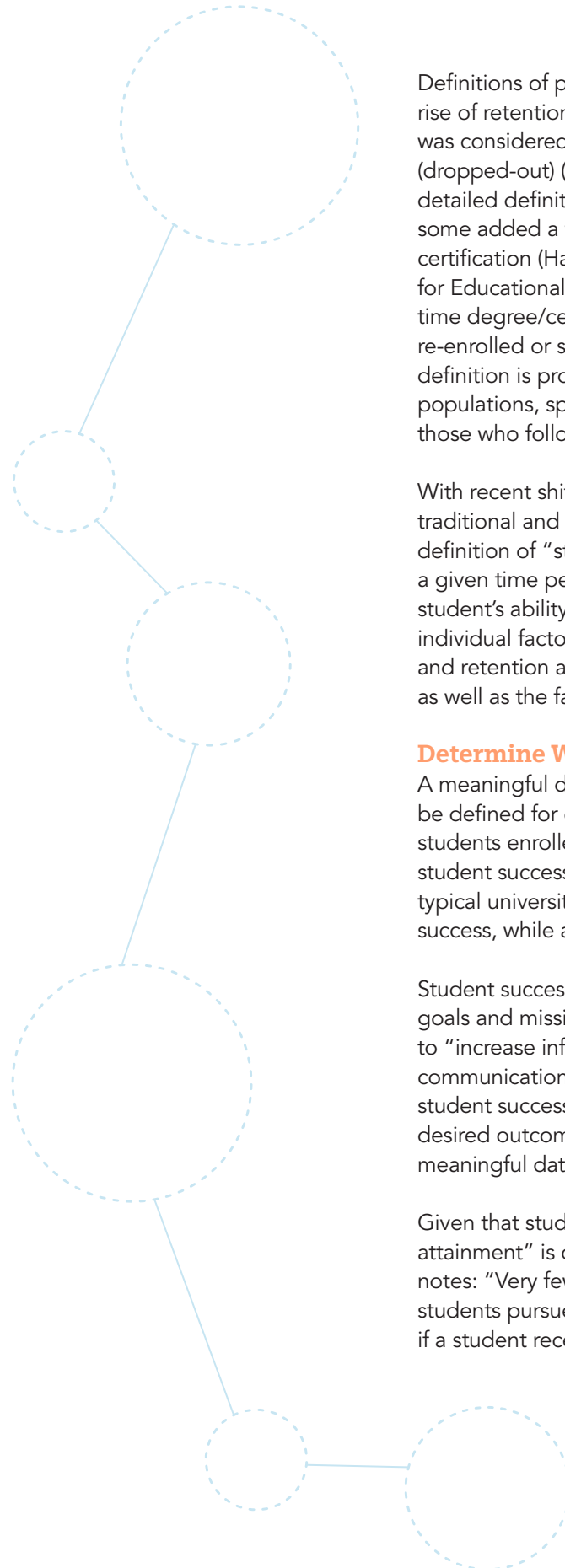
Examine Your Definitions

A necessary first step in developing an effective retention program is to establish definitions of student retention, persistence, and student success. In Higher Education circles, “persistence” and “retention” are often used interchangeably; however, these terms have distinct meanings.

Persistence is a student-based term that reflects whether an individual student continues to attend a school or “drops-out.”

Retention is an institution-level term used to describe the rate at which students remain enrolled at an institution.





Definitions of persistence and retention have evolved over time. Before the rise of retention as a prominent issue in Higher Education, student departure was considered largely dichotomous: students either stayed (persisted) or left (dropped-out) (Hagedorn, 2012). As the field gained more attention, more detailed definitions required persisters to be degree or certificate seeking and some added a time requirement by which students had to earn a degree or certification (Habley, Bloom, & Robbins, 2012). For example, the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) defines retention as: “The percentage of first-time degree/certificate seeking students from the previous autumn who either re-enrolled or successfully completed their program by the current autumn.” This definition is problematic, as it excludes sizeable portions of university and college populations, specifically those who are not “first-time” degree seekers as well as those who follow a non-traditional schedule.

With recent shifts in Higher Education, such as the increased incidence of non-traditional and part-time students, many administrators now focus on a broader definition of “student success” rather than simply persistence or graduation within a given time period. This evolution took place as universities observed that a student’s ability to persist often hinges on a mix of institutional, situational, and individual factors (Habley, 2012). Expanding the conversation beyond persistence and retention allows for a deeper examination of the goals of Higher Education, as well as the factors that contribute to individual as well as institutional success.

Determine What Student Success Means for Your Institution

A meaningful definition of student success is not one-size-fits-all. Instead, it must be defined for each university based on an understanding of both the goals of students enrolled at an institution and the institution’s mission. The definition of student success can vary widely from one university to the next. For example, a typical university may include first-year retention as a key component of student success, while a technical college may prioritize job placement results.

Student success is a broad category that can be tailored to fit the specific goals and mission of each institution. For example, a university with a mission to “increase information literacy” or “develop superior written and verbal communication skills” can incorporate these goals into its unique definition of student success. Mission statements that lend themselves to tangible goals and desired outcomes can feed practical definitions of student success, allowing meaningful data for analysis and program impact.

Given that student success begins with the student as an individual, “personal attainment” is often a key criterion used on campuses today. Hagedorn (2012) notes: “Very few or none of the millions of voluntarily enrolled postsecondary students pursue education in exactly the same way.” Bean (1990) contends that if a student receives education and experience adequate for his or her purposes,

then neither the student nor the institution should be considered a failure, regardless of degree completion. Elements of personal attainment may include academic achievement, engagement in campus activities, social integration, emotional and physical wellbeing, and professional success post-graduation.

Track Progress

Once an institution has crafted a meaningful definition of student success, the next step is to create a measurement plan based on these three key components:

Metrics: Determine the appropriate metrics to measure student success, as defined by both institution-level goals and individual or personal attainment goals (see prior section).

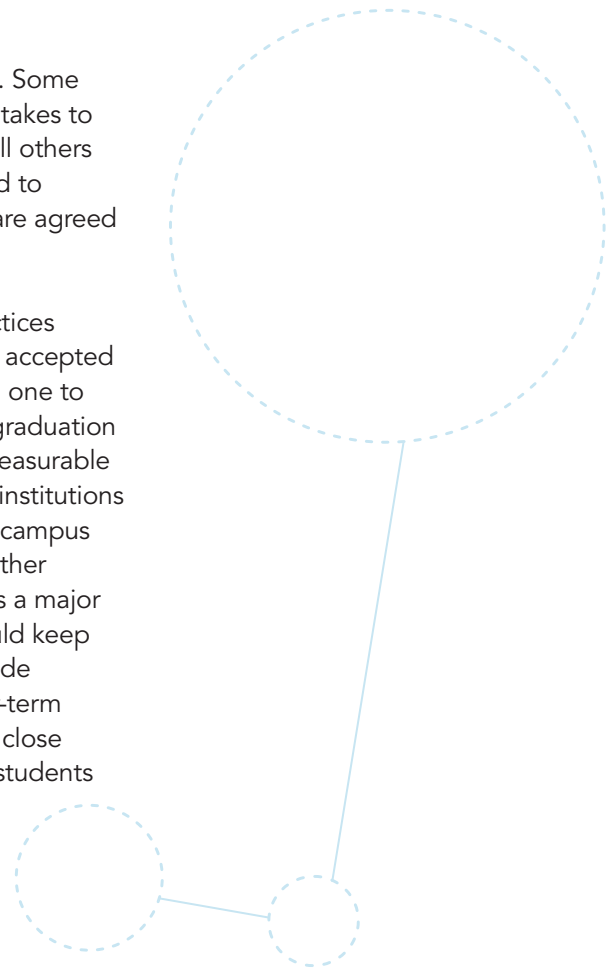
Timeframe: Define time horizons for measurement.

Measurement tools and processes: Identify and implement effective tools and processes to accurately measure each factor of student success on your campus.

The most meaningful metrics for student success are aligned with key characteristics of the institution's student population, mission, and goals. Some institutions have begun to measure "time to completion," or the time it takes to attain the desired degree or qualification, as an indicator for success. Still others focus on academic progression points, such as maintaining a course load to achieve a certain number of credits per term. Once the cogent metrics are agreed upon, the next step is to define the time horizon for assessment.

When establishing a time horizon to measure student success, best practices dictate using a mix of long-term and short-term metrics. The two widely accepted measures of success, retention and completion, can take anywhere from one to six years to measure, depending on the criteria. While persistence and graduation rates are critical components of any student success initiative, smaller measurable units that are observable during the course of a term or a year can help institutions address at-risk or challenged students as issues arrive. For example, if a campus prioritizes community engagement, participation in service projects or other campus activities may be effective indicators. If academic competence is a major component of an institution's success definition, then the institution would keep careful measurement of grade and academic assessment data and provide intervention to those students who perform below standard. These near-term indicators often relate directly to institutional definitions of success, and close monitoring can ensure interventions are taken over time to keep at-risk students on track.

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Measuring student-level success requires gathering both aggregate data on student populations as well as data pertaining to individual students. Institutions can measure individual student success, including student satisfaction and level of academic attainment, through a number of means including:

- + Surveys
- + Individual student success plans
- + Institution-wide data tracking
- + Risk factor flagging
- + Faculty reporting
- + Exit interviews

Relying on a combination of data collection methods allows for more accurate and complete reporting, which in turn facilitates more effective interventions.

Develop an Intervention Program

In addition to defining and measuring student success, effective initiatives incorporate preventative measures as well as timely interventions to support students throughout their academic careers. Interventions can take many forms, depending on students' needs and the resources available. Campuses often implement alert systems to notify advisors and other retention professionals of students in need of assistance, counseling, or other support. For instance, when a student fails to attend a given number of classes or reaches a minimum threshold Assessment or Grade Point Average (GPA), an alert might be generated in the form of an email to his or her advisor recommending an in-person meeting to review academic assistance options.

While early intervention is critical to supporting achievement, the challenge often lies in determining what behaviors or risk factors warrant an action on the part of an advisor. For instance, should advisors wait for midterm grades to assess which students are in need of assistance, or are there other factors that should be taken into consideration earlier in the semester? Furthermore, are there behavioral, socio-economic, or demographic factors that can serve as guideposts for preventative interventions, allowing institutions to support potentially high-risk students before an alert would be generated?

Predictive modeling has proven to be an effective tool to identify at-risk students up front—even before they arrive on campus. Using sophisticated statistical methods to identify student attributes correlated with attrition, institutions can identify individuals in need of preventative interventions and then take proactive steps to ensure they have the resources they need to succeed. An ideal complement to an effective alert system, predictive modeling generates risk profiles of each student. Based on this data, retention professionals can prioritize high-risk individuals when alerts are generated, acting quickly to take the appropriate actions to keep students on the path to success.

Predictive models that mirror a multifaceted understanding of student success and departure have yielded surprising results on many campuses. For instance, at some institutions analytical findings have disproven the nearly universally-supported belief that standardized test scores are the best predictor of success. To the contrary, factors such as campus employment or athletic participation are often more germane. Other institutions have discovered that first generation students and those who have undergone disciplinary actions are actually more likely to succeed than their peers. Using customized predictive analytics modeling, institutions can uncover the risk factors unique to their student population.

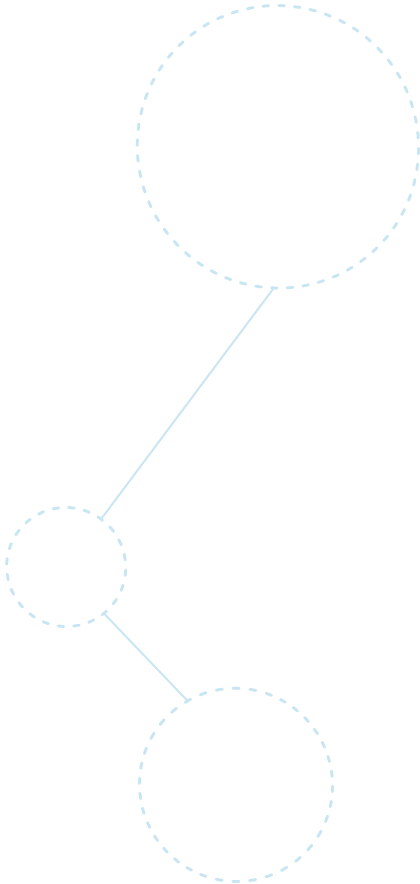
Predictive Models: Sample Risk Factors The specific risk factors relevant to each school are unique. Examples of potential risk factors include:	
+ Athletic Involvement	+ Resident Hall
+ Campus Employment	+ Admission Exam
+ First Generation	+ Geographical Region
+ First Year Fresher Seminar	+ Student Age
+ Midterm Assessment or GPA	+ Unmet Need
+ Recreational Involvement	+ Specialisation

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Create a Culture of Student Success

Institutions with effective student success initiatives integrate the goals and values of retention and success into the fabric of campus culture. Campus leadership frequently plays a critical role in setting goals and communicating priorities, thereby instilling a commitment to student success among broader community. Reducing attrition rates requires a collective effort involving administration, faculty, staff, students, and their families. Meaningful change can happen only when university leadership highlights student success as a key institutional priority to ensure buy-in and participation.

Whilst many institutions have some form of set goals to drive student success, most lack the management information and strategies to target the finite support services available, track ongoing effectiveness and student progress, and analyze the results to inform management strategies for a cross-campus holistic approach.

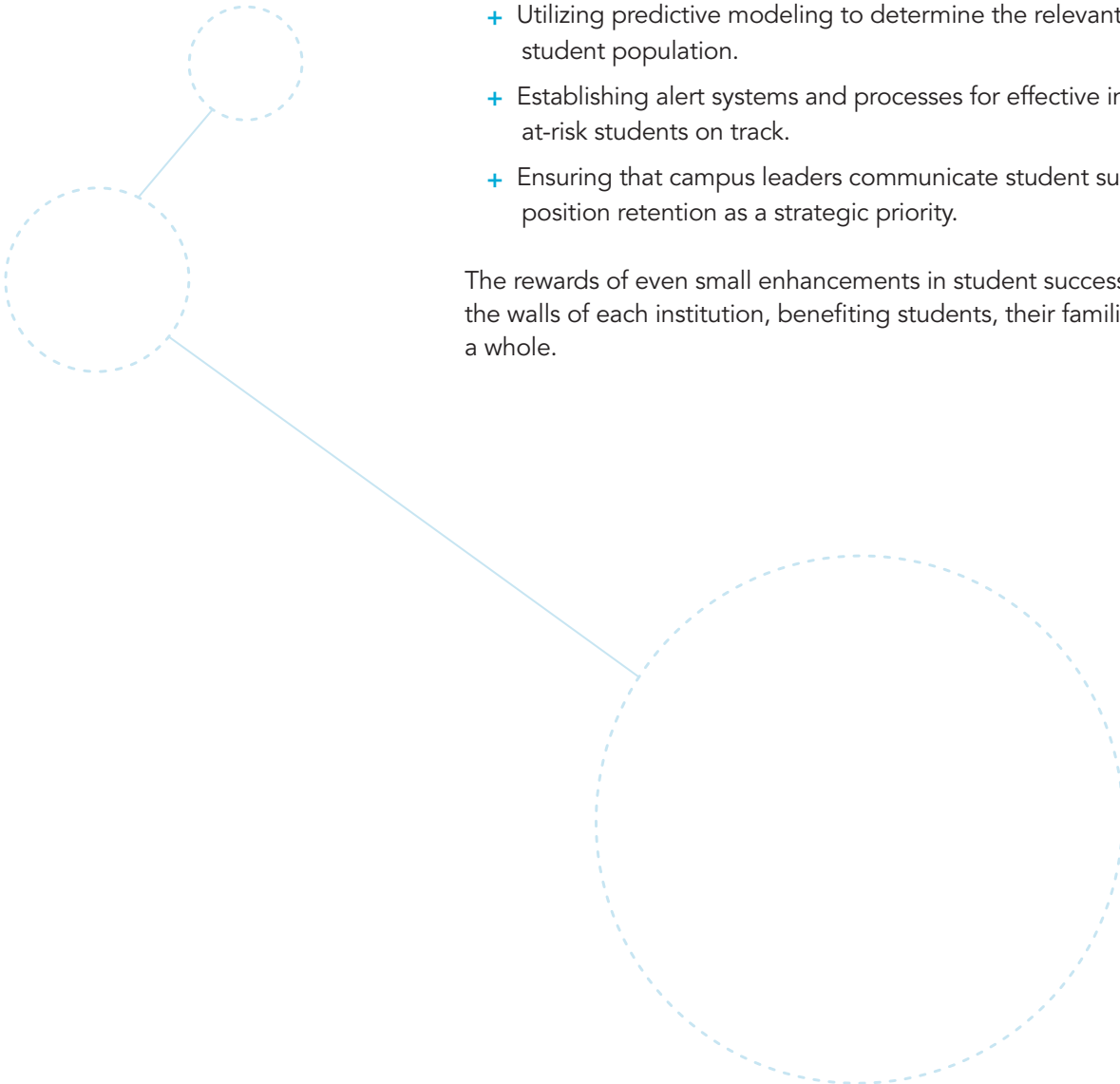


Draw from Best Practices

Implementing a high-impact initiative for student success is an attainable goal for any institution of Higher Education. Examples of highly effective initiatives abound, and resources are available to assist universities and colleges with every component of planning and implementation, from predictive modeling, to organizational change, to intervention planning. Based on best practices from the field, the key components of a student success initiative include:

- + Developing a definition of student success in alignment with the institution's mission and goals.
- + Measuring progress over time, using a variety of assessment methods.
- + Utilizing predictive modeling to determine the relevant risk factors for each student population.
- + Establishing alert systems and processes for effective interventions to keep at-risk students on track.
- + Ensuring that campus leaders communicate student success goals and position retention as a strategic priority.

The rewards of even small enhancements in student success extend far beyond the walls of each institution, benefiting students, their families, and society as a whole.



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With nearly a decade of experience in the field in Higher Education, Meghan Turjanica is currently Product Manager, Student Success Solutions with Jenzabar. Meghan's expertise in student success includes first-hand experience launching a successful retention program at Grove City College.

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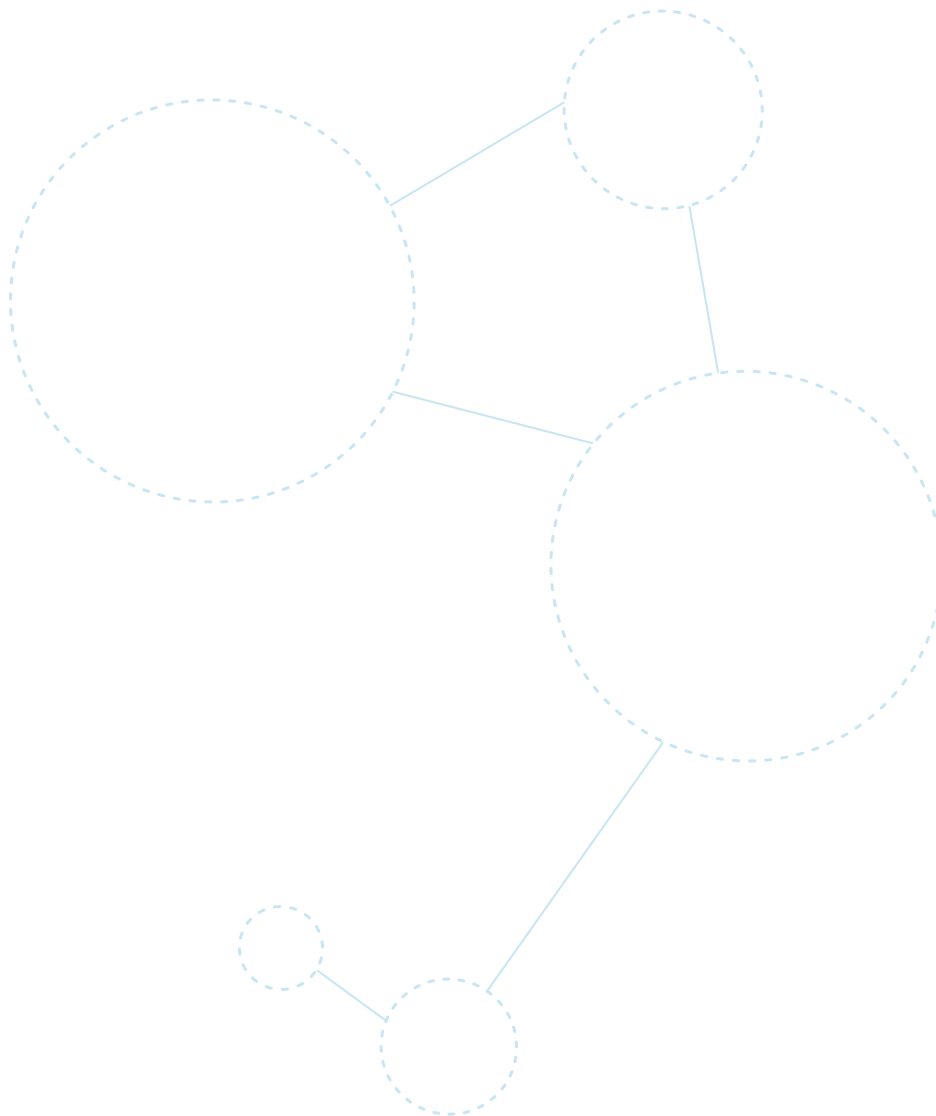
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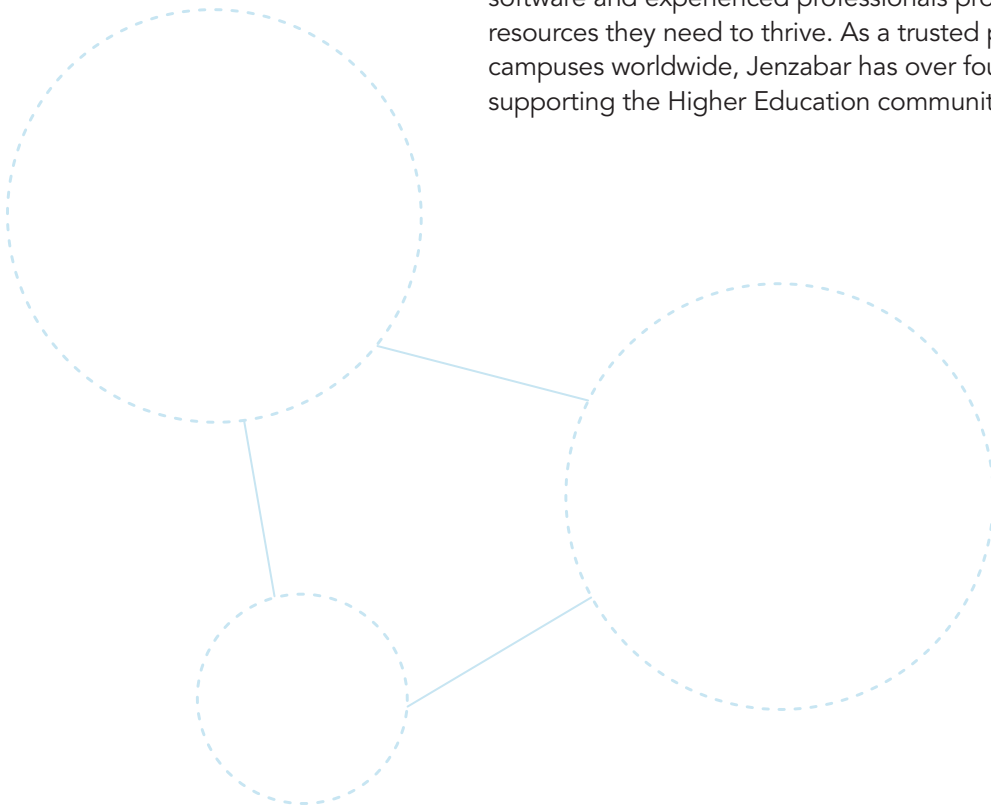
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