

WHITE PAPER

Seven Steps to Building a Data-Driven Culture in Higher Education



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WHAT WE ARE HEARING

In 2024, when speaking with Higher Education executives whose responsibilities include Enrollment, Recruitment, and Student Success, here are the concerns we are hearing from higher education executives:

- "Traditionally, we've had strong student retention, but lately, it's trending downwards, and we want to know why."
- "We want to know who our students are and find out the kind of students who succeed in our programs, but we don't know where to start."
- "We need to identify students at risk better and faster so we can get them the resources they need before it's too late."
- "We need to simplify data visualization. We need dashboards that tell our people, 'Here's what you need to know.' "
- "We know we have the answers in our data, but we have legacy systems everywhere, and we don't have the big-dollar budget to integrate them."



WHAT WE ARE HEARING

To exacerbate these concerns, higher education in the United States has seen a 15% decline since 2010, a loss of 3 million students largely due to students questioning the value of higher education vs. student debt. Add to this a looming Enrollment Cliff in the Fall of 2025 due to a drastic decline in birthrates during the Great Recession, and the need to attract and retain students has only increased. Those institutions that survive the looming cliff will know their students best, and those who know their students best will have the best data about their students.

The following pages review the seven steps higher education institutions can implement now to start their journey to building a data-driven culture.





1. LEADERSHIP COMMITMENT AND VISION

- **Leadership Buy-In:** University leaders, including administrators, deans, and department heads, must champion the importance of data-informed decision-making. Their commitment sets the tone for the entire institution.
- **Vision Statement:** Develop a clear vision statement that emphasizes the value of data-driven practices. Communicate this vision consistently to your team.





2. INFRASTRUCTURE AND DATA SYSTEMS

- **Data Governance:** Establish robust data governance practices. Define roles, responsibilities, and processes for data management. Ensure data security, privacy, and compliance. Institutions who do see bottom-line lasting benefits and improve the success of their students.
- **Integrated Systems:** Invest in systems that allow seamless data integration. Siloed data inhibits effective decision-making. Consider the [Datatelligent Platform for Higher Ed.](#)





3. DATA LITERACY TRAINING

- **Training Programs:** Do not think you can ‘build it and they will come.’ Design regular workshops and training sessions on data literacy. Your team should understand basic statistical concepts, data visualization, and interpretation.
- **Department-Specific Training:** Tailor training to specific roles (e.g., admissions, student services, finance). Each department has unique data needs.





4. TRANSPARENCY AND COMMUNICATION

- **Transparency:** An essential part of your Governance and Security plan, be transparent about data sources, methodologies, and limitations. Your team should know where the data comes from and how it's processed.
- **Regular Updates:** In a data-driven culture, everyone needs to be on the same page. Provide timely updates on institutional performance metrics. Dashboards and reports should be accessible to all team members.
- **Feedback Loop:** Encourage your team to provide feedback on data quality and usability. Act on their insights.





5. DATA-DRIVEN DECISION-MAKING PROCESSES

- **Define Key Metrics:** Develop KPI's relevant to each department. For admissions, it might be enrollment rates; for student services, retention rates, for advisement, identifying the students at risk and designing academic plans that ensure student success.
- **Use Cases:** Illustrate real-world scenarios where good data and data visualizations influenced decisions. Share success stories to inspire everyone.
- **Cross-Functional Collaboration:** Encourage collaboration across departments. Data insights often emerge at the intersection of disciplines.





6. ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

- **Privacy and Consent:** Understand the ethical implications of handling student data. Ensure compliance with privacy laws (e.g., FERPA). Hyper-vigilance is needed especially as AI tools are rolled out to enhance the Analytics.
- **Bias Awareness:** Train your team to recognize and mitigate biases in data analysis. Ethical use of predictive models is critical, especially now that we have entered the age of AI, which, not surprisingly, mimics the same biases as its human counterparts.





7. CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

- **Assessment:** Regularly assess the effectiveness of data-informed practices. Are we moving the needle on Student Retention? Are we identifying students at risk sooner? Are decisions improving? Is your team using data effectively?
- **Celebrate Wins:** Acknowledge and celebrate instances where data-informed decisions led to positive outcomes. Recognize every team member's contribution.



CONCLUSION

Building a data-informed culture is a long but rewarding journey. It requires collaboration, adaptability, and a shared commitment to student success—the ultimate motivation behind what we do. By empowering your team with data literacy and fostering a culture of curiosity, universities, and colleges can survive and thrive in an increasingly data-driven world that will soon have jet fuel added to the engines once AI tools catch up with the rest of us data-driven thinkers.





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ABOUT DATATELLIGENT

Datatelligent, a data analytics firm, enables the use of data to make our communities better. Our unique approach, Data Analytics as a Service (DAaaS), helps remove barriers for organizations to make data-driven decisions.

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