Defining student journey mapping in higher education: The 'how-to' guide for implementation on campus

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JP Rains

JP RAINS

is the Director of the Digital Strategy Office at his alma mater of Laurentian University in Sudbury, Ontario, Canada. He oversees the institution's digital footprint on the web and through social media while aiming to increase the digital IQ of the campus community. He is also President of Rains Media, where he works as a consultant in marketing and communication to private industry. Prior to this, Rains led strategy for two years as Vice-President of Strategy for Soshal Group, a digital agency working with a focus on clients in higher education. His work at Soshal led to multiple national awards and record setting performance for clients including: York University, University of New Brunswick and Cambrian College. He started his career after graduation at Laurentian University, working in the Office of Student Recruitment, followed by roles in various offices including: Marketing & Communications, Office of the Chief of Staff and Information Technology before joining Soshal Group. Rains has seen multiple years of success in student recruitment, including two years of 20 per cent plus increases to applications. Rains has consulted with over 25 Canadian and US-based higher education institutions and has implemented the Student Journey Mapping process with more than a dozen campuses. Additionally, he has interviewed over 1,000 stakeholders through the journey mapping process in an effort to deeply understand the perspectives of prospective students, current students, alumni and donors. Rains is the board chair of the Post-Secondary Education Web Conference of Canada and is a board member of the Laurentian University Alumni Association.

Abstract

A definitive process for reshaping the student experience — student journey mapping — allows for campus administrators to draw unique insights from the perspective of their key audience. Rooted in creating a user-centric experience, the concept of user journey mapping, also known as customer experience mapping, can be a cornerstone for projects in higher education. From changing the way in which students are recruited to the way donors are engaged, the student journey mapping process can help good business practices evolve into great ones. This process will describe how to bring together quantitative and qualitative data from multiple campus stakeholders (staff, faculty, students, etc.) and translate these data into insights that can reshape the student experience. Most importantly, the process describes how to develop this into actionable information that a campus community can understand. This paper will define the process of student journey mapping and provide campus administrators with concrete examples. Additionally, details are provided on how to best capture qualitative and quantitative data sets to inform the journey map. Finally, the connection between these data sets and the implementation plan is detailed to allow for actionable items to stem from the creation of a journey map.

Jean-Paul (JP) Rains MBA,

Tel: +1 705-919-1034;
E-mail: jl_rains@laurentian.ca

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WHY MAP THE STUDENT JOURNEY?

Every day, higher education administrators make decisions that influence the student journey; there can be literally thousands of these actions in a day. How do organisational leaders know with certainty that these procedural decisions the right ones? Have the expectations of students evolved to the point where our process no longer meets their expectations?

In higher education, students are both our consumer and our product, we must focus on them before anything else

Assessing the student journey through mapping allows an organisation to then create process changes that are from the perspective of their key audiences. Comparing the perspectives from multiple stakeholders (eg both students and administrators) allows for insights into processes that can be very revealing and lend themselves to strategic process evolution. For example, results commonly reveal areas where administrators identify important process changes; however, these changes are seen by students as having little or no value. Conversely, some procedural elements that may be innocuous to administrators can be extraordinarily frustrating to students.

Mapping the student journey (or a specific portion of it) is greater than a process review for one unit or department; ultimately, it allows for a deeper understanding of the impact these process changes will have on students.

In addition to understanding the student journey, with post-process reflection and reassessment, these maps allow teams to benchmark process improvements, as well as provide a foundation for building new tools (such as student portals, websites and apps). Furthermore, these maps are not limited to use in processes affecting current students, but can easily be applied to a variety of audiences in higher education, from prospective students to alumni and donors, each audience experiences a unique journey.

WHAT IS STUDENT JOURNEY MAPPING?

The goal of student journey mapping is to understand the student's journey through an institution. From the first point of contact a prospect has with a brand, to the last e-mail they receive as an alumnus or alumna, each activity throughout the journey is mapped and analysed. The aim of this process is to gain a student-centric understanding of each activity through qualitative and quantitative data collection, analysis and most importantly, changes to process.

This process takes origin in the private sector,[1] where the exploration and mapping of the customer experience has led to significant redefinition of everything from branding to customer service.[2] This focus on the customer, and seeing an organisation's process from their perspective, allows for organisations to understand how each piece of the process fits together and creates a point of differentiation when measured with competitors.[3] While students, alumni and donors are not customers, our process should put them at the centre of everything we do.

In an educational context, the mapping of the student journey allows organisational leaders to have a greater knowledge of the steps along the student journey, from the perspective of students.

While authors have previously explored the question of how students choose a university,[4] this exercise in journey mapping allows for a deeper understanding of how students experience the process of choosing an institution. This experience can have as much influence on the outcome as other traditional factors such as programme reputation and institutional reputation.

While individual administrators have expert-level knowledge of their departmental processes, do they also know how these processes are perceived by students? Furthermore, are these same administrators aware of the other processes that influence students in that same period of time?

The student experience does not happen in a vacuum, even if some processes do. It is crucial to evaluate the experience — or journey — as one that is seamless and not immune from outside forces.

For most institutions, there is much to gain through understanding and reshaping the student journey.

WHAT DOES A STUDENT JOURNEY MAP LOOK LIKE?

While many institutions of higher education often aim to 'put the student first' there is rarely a practical framework for doing so. Safe from generalised focus groups and occasional student input, institutions rarely perform in-depth analysis of the student's perspective on a particular phase of their student journey.

The primary elements of a student journey map are:

1. audience;
2. goals;
3. activities;
4. entry points;
5. emotions;
6. barriers; and
7. insights.

These elements, when brought together, form the 'student journey map'. Figure 1 shows a student's decision making phase, chronologically, from left to right. It outlines the stages (time between goals), activities (colour coded circles), entry points (first few circles), emotions (feeling and thinking) and finally, barriers (small dark circles). The insights gleaned from

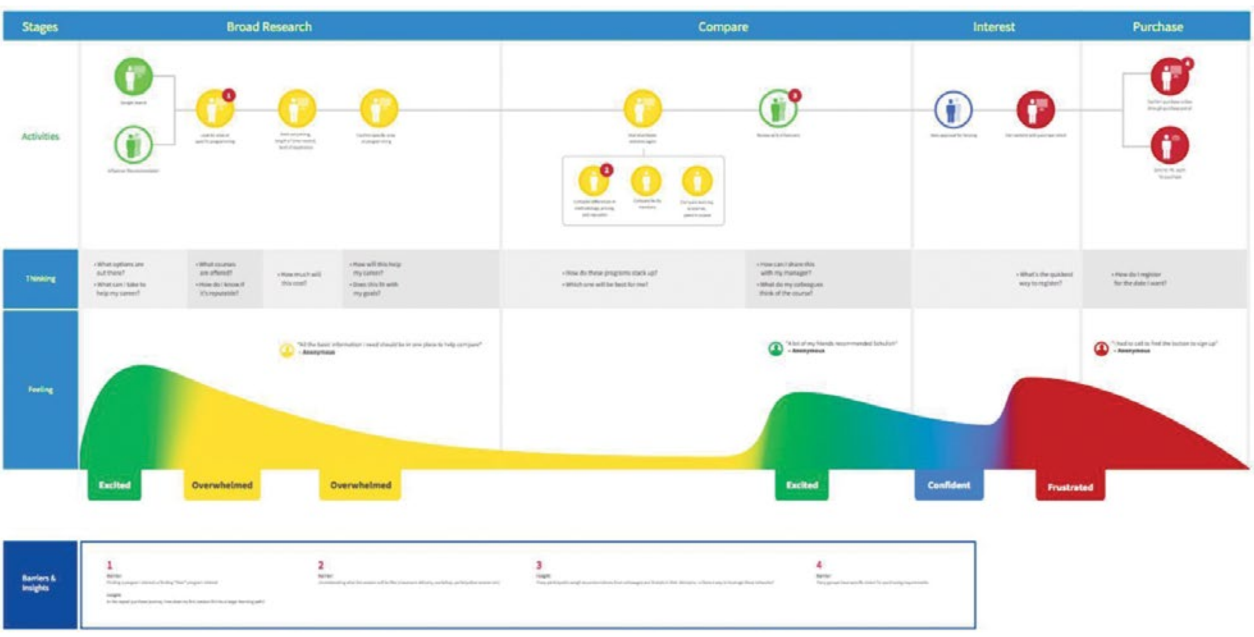


FIGURE 1 Map data minimised and information modified to protect client data

the process should be described in an accompanying document. It most often takes the shape of a list that describes the major findings from the journey map.

How can we create this data?

While Figure 1 demonstrates the final visual produced, the process of creating the student journey map involves six major steps:

1. define audience(s);
2. build a list of goals and activities (baseline);
3. test the baseline through data collection;
4. associate relevant emotions and barriers to activities;
5. create a list of insights; and
6. create an implementation plan based on insights.

While each of these procedural outcomes does not 'form' the resulting map, they do inform the *elements* that comprise the map. Maps can be very complex or simplified, depending on the purpose of the map and the complexity of the student journey.

Figure 2 identifies a very simplified version of a journey map. Three phases are identified in this case of a student's prospective journey: research, consideration and application. The circles show each activity within the journey as well as the emotions students face. The confused emotions demonstrate where barriers exist.

Audience

The first element of any map is determining which audience will be its focus. While the exercise itself may collect information on multiple audiences or sub-audiences, each visual map should be focused on a single audience. For example, a simplified map could focus on the local domestic prospective student, entering directly from high school; however, another map may have a wider focus on exploring the journey for all domestic prospective students and leave out activities that apply only to specific types of sub-audiences (eg leaving out admission processes that are specific to nationwide applicants versus local applicants).

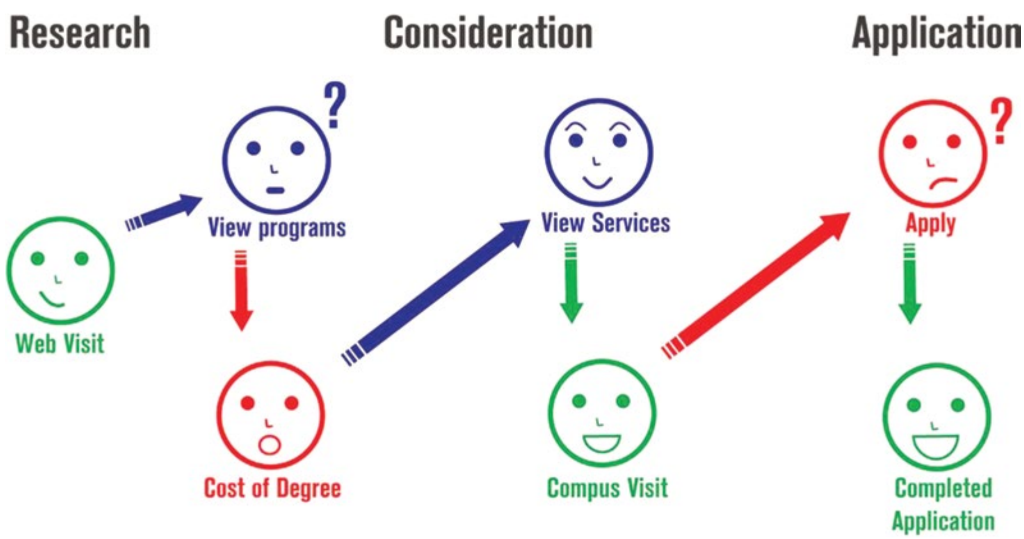


FIGURE 2 Student journey mapping: research, consideration and application

Common audiences include prospective students, current students, alumni, donors, government stakeholders, associations and community partners.

When determining which audience to evaluate (among the many) it is important to focus on areas that align with organisational objectives. For example, if an organisational goal is to increase international student enrolment, this audience should be specified within the mapping exercise and may even warrant multiple audiences from different geographical areas that experience significantly different journeys (eg a Chinese student versus an Indian student).

Moreover, during the mapping exercise there may be a discovery of a specific sub-audience that was not previously considered, therefore adjusting the mapping exercise to include this sub-audience is recommended. For example, through the process of mapping the journey of international students, if it is found that a large number of students originate from a specific country with unique admission criteria, including this within the map is advisable.

Entry points

Each audience has specific 'entry points' into their student journey. These entry points represent the first touch points a student would have with the organisation. There may be multiple entry points for a specific audience.

For example, within the donor journey, there may be entry points of:

- an introduction from a mutual connection;
- an article in national newspaper; or
- an event hosted by institution.

Each major entry point should be listed within the map in order to demonstrate the start of a journey.

Goals

The key elements of a map, the goals, are common to all members of an audience on a map.

These are the ties that bind the student journey. There are many activities and events that take place throughout a student's journey; however, the goals will be milestones for each student. These goals often mark the completion of a phase in the journey.

For example, a common goal for prospective students is to receive an offer of admission. While students will receive these in many different formats or circumstances, it is a goal that each student would hold. Similarly, for current students, a common goal in the journey mapping process would be graduation.

Goals are commonly determined by the administrative stakeholders and are then confirmed via student interviews. Within a journey map, it is advisable to include two to four goals throughout the journey map.

Activities

Truly the bulk of any student journey map, the activities (as seen in Figure 3) represent all events or actions students will take along their journey. In any map, a determination must be made as to which activities are listed. Criteria for listing these activities can include audience participation rate and level of impact on the student journey.

Audience participation rate

This is determined by analysing the audience surveyed in a particular mapping process. More specifically, the audience participation rate represents the percentage of students that will experience this activity throughout their student journey.

FIGURE 3 Activities section of a student journey map
Note: LMS: learning management system

This participation rate can be used to determine whether or not an activity should be listed in a journey map.

For example, when analysing an alumni audience, which percentage of the audience has attended a graduation ceremony? If this number is very high, it stands to reason that it should be included in the map. Conversely, if participation rate is very low, this activity may not apply to the majority of an audience and could be left out of the journey map.

Further examples of activities for alumni and their participation rate include:

- Receive alumni newsletter (50 per cent of alumni — should be mapped).
- Participate in alumni hosted event (25 per cent of alumni — should be mapped).
- Visit campus after graduation (15 per cent of alumni — should be mapped).
- Become alumni board member (0.01 per cent of alumni — should not be mapped).
- Receive alumni recognition award (1 per cent of alumni — should not be mapped).

Level of impact

Although highly subjective, this metric is used to understand whether or not the activity is significantly impacting the student journey. Evidently, the level of 'significance' is relative to other activities within the journey, meaning a given map may only demonstrate 25 of the most significant activities.

This level of impact may also be measured by the emotional impact on a student. For example, a map may strive to include the five most common activities within a journey (rate of participation) as well as an additional five events that produce positive or negative emotional reactions.

For example, activities along the student journey for a graduate student may include:

1. Choose advisory committee.
2. Propose thesis topic.
3. Thesis topic rejected (uncommon, but emotionally significant).
4. Begin data collection.
5. Application for grant funding rejected (emotionally significant).

Each of these activities influences the student journey and shapes the emotional state of students.

In order to create a list of activities, there are multiple methods of creating a baseline; however, the recommended approach is to conduct interviews with administrative stakeholders and then test this baseline of activities through audience interviews. It is common to see multiple activities added to the student journey as students provide examples of memorable activities. A common activity that is not identified by administrators in the current journey of a student on a regional campus is the process of determining daily transportation to the institution. This can be a major stressor for some audiences.

Activities may also be listed as 'conditional' when they are contingent upon an outcome of a previous activity. For example, students who are denied admission to their first choice programme but are granted admission to an alternate programme may have a unique path towards their goal (Figure 4).

Emotions

Associated to activities, emotions, in the context of the student journey map, represent the emotional state of a student as they complete the activity. These emotions are influenced by past activities, as well as outside factors.

Emotions should be reflective of the prevailing student sentiment, although this can be difficult as there are occasions where students will be divided. These emotions should be accompanied by statements of what the students are feeling within that particular activity or point in time.

Figure 5 represents a first year student's first semester on campus, starting with their first class and ending with their exam period. The thought bubbles represent actual comments received during interviews and the prevailing sentiment of students. The complexity of these emotions reduces into very base emotions, as seen in the last comment, a simple 'No' represents the complete exhaustion of students during an exam period.

Barriers

Commonly associated with points of friction along the student journey, barriers represent challenges through the journey where the audience experiences a negative interaction. Like emotions, these barriers are identified within the activities of the student journey. They are

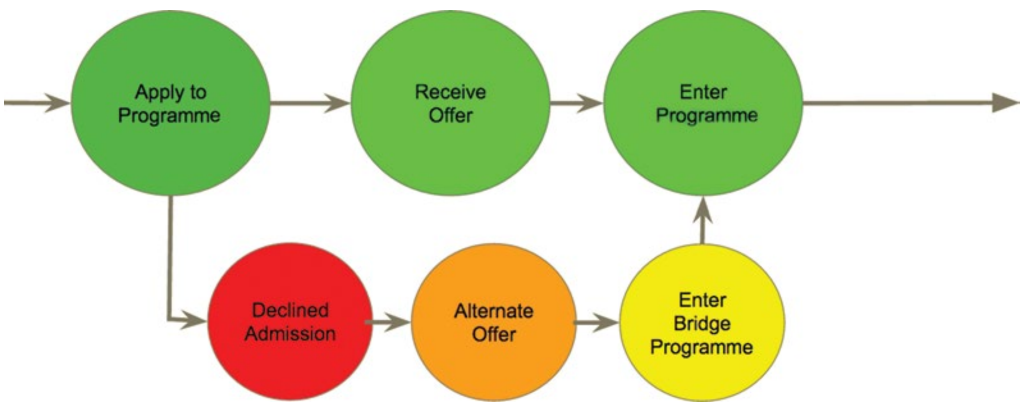


FIGURE 4 Sample of how to treat conditional activities in a student journey map

FIGURE 5 Sample of how emotions can be treated in a student journey map

often identified by a negative emotional reaction to an activity, for example, frustration with a specific online form.

Either students are lost as to the next step (and may struggle to find themselves on the journey as a result) or they are frustrated with a portion of a process. These points are where administrators must focus efforts to reduce barriers.

These barriers are typically informed by the student perspective and should be validated through the data collection process. A revelatory exercise is to contrast barriers identified by administrators versus those identified by students, as they are often dissimilar. Furthermore, barriers should be the points of focus for any process improvements and can be prioritised by the intensity or volume of students that report them.

For example, a common barrier to prospective students is the complex academic admission process. They may abandon an application for many reasons and the barrier should highlight the most common of these reasons.

Insights

Linked to activities, emotions and barriers, insights tell us which problems we need to solve. These shape the future direction of any process modification or changes to the student experience. These insights represent the knowledge gained throughout the process.

These insights allow us to think beyond a particular barrier and explore the source of the problem. For example, many new students experience barriers when first logging into their online accounts (eg e-mail, learning management system, portals) and the barriers will be detailed in that same section; however, in the insights section, a proposed approach to addressing this barrier would be presented. An example of an insight related to setting up accounts would be 'the process of digital account creation should be simplified for students, reducing the total sign-up time required and making use of the information students have already provided, such as contact information'.

The plan of action, leading out of the student journey mapping process, would determine exactly how the process would be simplified. It is important that the journey map identify the problem and recommend a strategy (not a specific solution, as these should be developed at a departmental level).

Ultimately, the insights define the strategy and the implementation plan defines tactics.

Implementation plan

This plan should outline the recommended actions that will be taken as a result of the student journey mapping process. Additionally, the plan should define the specific tactics that will be utilised to improve the student journey.

The plan should prioritise (based on the level of impact with respect to the barriers) recommendations and should be understood by all parties involved in a particular section of the journey map. For example, if the journey map has identified barriers to be resolved through the admission process, the admissions team should be involved in determining which actions will remove the barrier.

This implementation plan should have timelines attached to each step and include a final step of collecting new data (after the implementation plan is concluded) to understand the impact of the changes on the student journey. Specifically, it is important to collect the same data sets in order to have a common comparison.

DATA COLLECTION PROCESS

Within the data collection process of the student journey mapping exercise, there are two primary types of data — qualitative and quantitative. Each is of equal importance and has specific functions within the exercise.

This data collection process takes place throughout the student journey mapping exercise at various stages. Data will be used in multiple ways: first to create the baseline of activities within the student journey, then to validate information discovered through focus groups or interviews and finally to shape insights for strategic decision making.

Data, and the resulting information, are crucial to creating an accurate student journey map.

Quantitative data

The quantitative side of data collection may focus on data that are readily available and relevant to the student experience, but it may also necessitate the collection of primary quantitative data.

Common examples of these data, and the resulting questions, are:

- Google Analytics
  - Does the traffic flow on the website reflect the decision making process explained by prospective students? If not, how could we change the website flow to match a student's decision making process?
  - Do particular forms on the institutional website experience very low completion rates?
- Types of questions received by the student services team
  - How many questions did we receive about the process for graduation last year? If this volume is unusually high, should we redefine the process or communicate it more effectively?
- Institutional data related to volume of audiences
  - If we have three primary audiences within an exercise (for example: prospective students may include online students, international students and domestic students) how many students are in each group relative to the whole?

This quantitative data should provide insight as to where students may be facing barriers within the student journey. This is important as it will allow an informed discussion when conducting interviews with administrators. These administrators should confirm or disprove certain aspects of the raw data. In the qualitative stage, it is essential to nuance the data in order to draw informed conclusions.

Qualitative data

While the quantitative data can help draw conclusions about the behaviour of an audience, it must be validated through the qualitative data (and vice versa). Furthermore, in the realm of higher education, there are many circumstances and external factors that may shape a particular crop of students and their experience. For example, if one very important e-mail is not sent to the majority of students, it may be perceived as a barrier for that academic year or intake class. While that is truly a barrier, it may have already been rectified for the following year and should not be included in an implementation plan.

Within the qualitative data sets, there are three main ways to find data: focus groups, interviews and surveys featuring open ended questions.

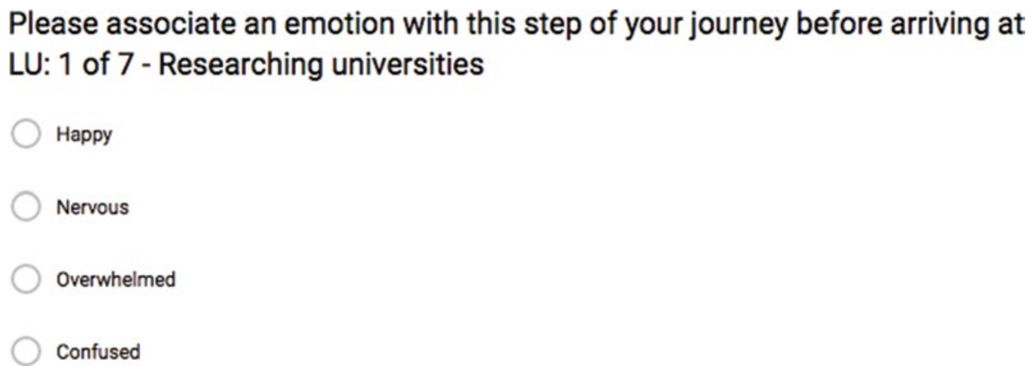
Focus groups can be used within interviews with administrative units to understand which activities of the student journey they may influence. Further, these administrators can highlight specific barriers that may have been encountered by large groups of students, alumni or donors. While these comments need to be validated through in-person interviews with students, they can be valuable in forming the list of questions for students.

Nevertheless, focus groups are not recommended for collecting data within the specific audience members featured in the student journey — each student journey is unique and should be collected in that same process in order to not be influenced by other journeys. These interviews may be conducted in a variety of methods: in person, over the phone or online in a messenger chat. Focus groups can enable tremendous feedback from participants in higher education[5] and should be researched further before holding one for the first time.

Interviews are highly useful for exploring a root cause of a barrier or negative emotion; students may omit details if they are not prompted for insight into a specific area. For example, many graduating students may not initially mention the level of anxiety they felt in the first few weeks of classes and remember only the great events they experienced. In order to measure this part of the experience accurately, interviewing students at various points within the student journey will allow for an accurate representation of all activities.

Additionally, within interviews, it is essential to modify the questions in order to focus on which phase of the student journey may have had the biggest impact on a particular student. Allow extra time during interviews to focus within specific areas where students may have a higher level of detail to provide about their experiences.

Finally, survey data can be used to engage a large amount of students from a qualitative perspective. This can be especially useful when collecting emotions associated to specific activities. The emotions collected in one-on-one interviews can be validated with a larger data set. For example, asking a large number of students which emotion they would most commonly associate with the application process will provide a good baseline to validate data from one-on-one interviews. Figure 6 is a screenshot from a recently completed survey.


Please associate an emotion with this step of your journey before arriving at LU: 1 of 7 - Researching universities

- Happy
- Nervous
- Overwhelmed
- Confused

FIGURE 6 Sample of the qualitative data collection questions used to collect emotional information

EXPERIENCES: JOURNEY MAPPING SUCCESSES AND LESSONS LEARNED, PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE

How was the decision to map the process taken?

While reasons for mapping the process have varied from campus to campus, the one constant has been an acknowledgement of challenges at one critical point in the student journey. Often, the desire to map the process originates within one specific administrative department and then extends towards others. As a result, the need for the process has been identified from a variety of areas. From the author's experience, these areas have been:

- student services:
  – scholarships and bursaries;
  – academic student support.
- marketing and communications:
  – brand.
- information technology:
  – websites and portals.
- student recruitment;
- advancement:
  – alumni relations;
  – donor relations.

These departments have highlighted the need for their institution to map the process and in many cases, garnered support and funds from other impacted areas to support the process. Ultimately, the journey mapping process can identify that many challenges within a part of the journey may be caused by a lack of awareness in the full student journey.

Who should lead the process on campus?

The author has worked successfully with many different campus leaders that have seen success in the process. These specific roles have included:

- Associate Vice-President, Marketing & Communications;
- Chief Information Officer;
- Director, Digital;
- Director, Student Services;
- Special Advisor to the President; and
- Executive Director, College Advancement.

These campus leaders will most often be the 'sponsor' of the project and will be supported directly by a campus-side 'project manager'. In cases where the author has executed the project within their own institution, they acted as both the project manager and sponsor. The primary characteristics for the project manager should be:

- Knowledge of the journey mapping process.
- Focus on the student experience.
- Critical analysis.
- Project experience.

Each campus is unique and will have a different approach to project leadership; however, the author recommended that if the process is undertaken by a fully internal campus team, the project manager should be sequestered from their regular duties for the duration of the project. If being supported by an external leader, the campus-side project leader may be required to spend up to 50 per cent of their time supporting the project. This typically includes providing background documents, providing campus insights, supporting the interview process, removing barriers for external parties, critical analysis of findings and most importantly, supporting the development of the implementation plan.

How long will this process take?

The length of the project should be dependent on the scope of the project. The author has completed most journey mapping processes within three to four months from inception, with some projects being completed in as little as six weeks and some as many as six months. In an ideal scenario, this project could take one full academic cycle to complete the initial project and should take one to two months each year to collect fresh data and new implementation plans.

The scope of the project will largely be defined by the volume of audiences being evaluated. Delays are commonly seen during the process of collecting qualitative data via interviews. These interviews can be a challenge for scheduling as they are often subject to the availability of staff, faculty, alumni and students.

What are the common obstacles to adoption?

Once the process has been completed, common challenges exist during the implementation phase. These include:

- Resistance to change:
  - Often rooted in a belief that the changes will not have the desired impact, or a symptom of lack of involvement throughout the journey mapping process, many campus administrators resist changing their process.
- Prioritising implementation plan over operational needs:
  - This is often experienced in departments where the desire to respond to immediate issues takes priority over the changes to the process that causes these immediate issues.
- Lack of integration with departmental plans or organisational goals:
  - If elements of your implementation plan are not also explicitly stated in departmental plans or organisational goals, they will be overlooked.
- Lack of executive support:
  - This process will require the full support of many executives, without it, parts of the implementation plan will not be realised.

Lessons learned

1. The most crucial element of a student journey mapping process is deciding where to focus. This will be important

in selecting which audiences and sub-audiences to evaluate. Having multiple audiences and sub-audiences will decrease the depth with which audiences are evaluated, unless the project is lengthened.

2. During the interview process, keep in mind that your interviewees will not have a perfect memory. The further back you go into their memories, the greater their own current day biases will shape their answers.
3. Do not interview your audience members in groups. This was touched on in the data collection section, but it was a lesson learned throughout the evolution of this process. While focus groups are useful, they are also unequally shaped by the more vocal participants. Audience members will also be influenced by the judgement of their peers, decreasing their honesty. In one particular case, the author dismissed a full day of focus group data in favour of executing fresh one-on-one interviews. This decision was challenging, but was the right move, as it allowed us to collect more accurate data.
4. The results of the process can cause problems. After pouring over the many data points and interviews, the results can be very powerful. In one case, the results of a journey mapping process identified that a specific administrative unit was drastically underperforming in the eyes of their audience. This resulted in significant challenges with the unionised staff that felt as though they were being unfairly criticised. It is important that the process strikes a balance between transparency and sharing results. It is essential to report areas where challenges exist; however, it is also important to rally around these same areas and provide a supportive plan moving forward.

Achievements

As a result of the process, many institutions have greatly benefited. While the author is bound by confidentiality agreements in many cases, examples where positive results were achieved can be shared.

A particularly successful project saw the end result of the student journey map being used to guide strategy of a full website redesign. This design was then shaped to be extraordinarily student-centric and allowed for each step in the prospective student journey to influence web page tone, the order in which content was presented and action items.

Another successful project used the journey maps to educate interdependent administrative units on their individual processes and the impact on the students. This allowed each of the departments to gain a deeper understanding of the student's journey before reaching their department, enabling them to better respond to student needs.

Finally, at the author's alma mater of Laurentian University, they have implemented the student journey map as a tool to shape all communications with prospective students. Having identified sub-audiences within this group, they can now also tailor their communications via e-mail to specific lists that match up with the sub-audiences, enabling them to better inform students about services that are pertinent to their journey. They will continue to use this data as they redefine their student portal for current students and increase their degree of automation within communication.

CONCLUSIONS

The process of student journey mapping in higher education can provide a holistic view of the student journey that brings a unique perspective on many barriers students face throughout their journey. While the process can be arduous, the rewards are revelatory.

Although this is an emerging field of work within higher education, it has been known to provide tremendous value to other sectors where customer service and innovation are expected.

Understanding this journey can help campus administrators see their process from an audience-centric perspective, allowing for unique insights, process innovation and most importantly, a focus on removing barriers for students, alumni and donors.

Additionally, this process allows administrators to discover elements of the student journey that they have not been exposed to, increasing their degree of appreciation for the work done by their colleagues, as well as the challenges faced by students outside of their contact points. This increased level of awareness can be a great help in removing communication barriers and fostering collaboration.

Finally, the student journey mapping process is one that can be used to track improvements over time. As administrative processes continuously improve, the journey mapping process can track, longitudinally, the impact of the process improvement from the perspective of students.

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