

Jason Altmire ([00:05](#)):

Welcome to another edition of Career Education Report. I'm Jason Altmire, and today we are going to talk about student success. There's nothing more important in higher education than making sure that the students who are involved regardless of their path to get there, that they're successful in their endeavor with higher education. We have Dr. Timothy Renick from the National Institute for Student Success. Can't think of a better guest to have this topic.

([00:33](#)):

I first saw Dr. Renick, he testified before the House of Representatives over the summer, the Education and Workforce Committee. And then he's been quoted numerous times since then, and I just think he's doing amazing work. Dr. Renick, thank you very much for being with us.

Dr. Timothy Renick ([00:50](#)):

Pleasure to be here, Jason.

Jason Altmire ([00:52](#)):

The National Institute for Student Success is relatively new. Can you talk about what is your mission? You're the founding executive director, what are you trying to achieve?

Dr. Timothy Renick ([01:03](#)):

Yeah, the student success field has changed remarkably over the last decade. We've always been challenged in higher education to deliver personalized services to our students, and what that has historically meant is that well-resourced institutions, institutions with small enrollments and large endowments, had a huge advantage because they could hire lots of faculty and staff and deliver lots of personal attention to students.

([01:28](#)):

Places like Georgia State University where I've been situated, we're large, 52,000 students, majority/minority, about almost 80% of our students are non-white, we were at an extreme disadvantage because it was hard to amount personalized services across 50,000 students, especially with low tuition, and in many cases, high student to faculty ratios. What's happened in the field of student success over the last decade is we've begun to yield new results from leveraging data and technology.

([01:58](#)):

You think about some of the systems used in the commercial space, Amazon using data in order to make predictions about which customers would want which products. Well, some of those same approaches can apply to deliver to individuals services that they've raised their hand and said that they want like a college degree, helping students figure out what their major is, help them figure out when they've gone off path before they end up dropping out, what they need to do to get right again, and so forth.

([02:27](#)):

Predictive analytics, big data, AI, chatbots, microgrants, all of these new tools that we have in the Student Success Toolbox basically require a certain degree of technical know-how. They've been proven to be effective. They've been proven, in some cases, to be transformative, but they're not well-known and well-disseminated as practices across the field nationally. What the NISS does, the National Institute for Student Success, is help other campuses figure out how to implement these programs.

[\(03:00\)](#):

We provide consulting services. We provide diagnostic. We work with campuses up to five to six months just to understand how their systems, their student support systems are working. And then we'll work with them after that from one to three years to help them implement some of these new database evidence supported programs that have proven to be so effective.

Jason Altmire [\(03:20\)](#):

You mentioned your institute is based at Georgia State University, which may be a surprise to some, but Georgia State actually has an incredible story of success of implementing these very measures and achieving great student success. Can you talk about your work at Georgia State and why Georgia State is an appropriate venue to host this discussion?

Dr. Timothy Renick [\(03:43\)](#):

I'm a professor at Georgia State, but about 15 years ago, I took a pivot in my career. I moved from being a faculty member and a department chair to heading up the student success efforts at Georgia State. We had a lot of challenges, quite frankly. Our graduation rates were low, around 30% of our students were graduating on time. We had huge equity gaps, so our white and our middle and upper income students were grossly outperforming compared to their counterparts, and we didn't have a lot of resources.

[\(04:12\)](#):

We became an innovative institution in student success by necessity. We didn't have a lot of money, didn't have great staffing levels, and so forth. We had to find ways to begin to support our students better. We became one of the first schools in the country, this was back in 2012, to scale the use of predictive analytics to track students on a day-to-day basis and identify when they were facing problems.

[\(04:36\)](#):

We're tracking every student at Georgia State every day for 800 different risk factors, if they sign up for the wrong class, if they're not engaged in their courses by our tracking of their participation in electronic platforms like learning management systems. If they underperform in the first course in their major, if they have holds on their accounts, things that the historical data show put students at risk, we're not sitting back and waiting for the student to identify the problem.

[\(05:02\)](#):

We're tracking the problem and reaching out to the student with intervention sometimes within 24 hours after the problem was identified. Last year alone, we had over 100,000 interventions, proactive interventions, coming out of this platform with our undergraduate students. We've pioneered the use of microgrants at Georgia State. One of the real challenges with financial aid is getting the aid into the hands of the students who most need it in a timely fashion. There are usually a lot of bureaucratic obstacles to that.

[\(05:33\)](#):

The FAFSA is the most obvious example, the Federal Financial Aid form, which is basically filling out your income taxes in order to get the money. But there are all kinds of other barriers, including just knowing about where the money is and whether you qualify. We've cut that all out of the equation. Our largest institutional aid program, Panther Retention Grants, award microgrants to students, especially those who are at the later stages of their college degree programs without them having to apply.

[\(06:00\)](#):

We're looking at data. We're trying to identify students who are running out of aid, who are good academic risks, and we're just putting the money in their accounts. We've given 19,000 of those grants out over the last decade. We also became in 2016 one of the first schools in the country to pioneer the use of AI to support students and student success. We have an AI enhanced chatbot, an automatic communication platform that is able to answer students' questions 24/7.

[\(06:27\)](#):

They type or text a question in via their smart device and the AI helps locate the right answer out of a knowledge base we've developed. The first three months we had this system available, it had over 180,000 exchanges with Georgia State students. We begun to find innovative ways to deliver more personalized attention to students, and it made a huge difference. We've raised our graduation rates overall by 70%.

[\(06:52\)](#):

But what we found, even though all these systems are available equally to students from all backgrounds, is that these interventions had a disproportionately positive impact upon our minority students, our first generation students, our low income students. What happened is while our graduation rates went up 70% overall, they went up over 100% for our Black, our low income, our Hispanic students, to the point now where we have no equity gaps.

[\(07:19\)](#):

We're one of the very few colleges or university where over the last six, seven years, our Black, our low income and our Hispanic students have all graduated at or above the rate of the student body overall. Maybe most strikingly this institution that is here in Downtown Atlanta in the shadow of the Martin Luther King District, but was segregated into the 1960s now awards more bachelor's degrees to Black students than any other college or university in the US.

[\(07:47\)](#):

Georgia State is not just talking about these type of interventions and these type of new approaches to student success, we've been the testing ground for many of them. We are a logical place to house the National Institute for Student Success.

Jason Altmire [\(08:01\)](#):

You tick through a lot of measures there and successes that you've had as an institution, and it might seem self-intuitive to some. What is the definition of student success? What is the problem that exists and how are you defining what success looks like for a student's higher education experience?

Dr. Timothy Renick [\(08:21\)](#):

As an educator, a long time faculty member, and my field is actually in the humanities, even though now I spend all my life doing data on a day-to-day basis, there are different measures that we should take seriously, but the founding principle of the National Institute for Student Success is that we need to do much better as a sector in improving graduation rates and reducing equity gaps.

[\(08:46\)](#):

What we're first and foremost concerned with is if a student enrolls in a two-year institution or a four-year institution, they should be graduating with that degree that they set out to achieve in a timely fashion, and they should be doing so regardless of their race, their ethnicity, their income level. They

should be succeeding at high levels. That's the twin mission of the NISS, and it's absolutely essential because right now we're not succeeding as a nation with regard to those two measures.

[\(09:15\)](#):

Right now, only between 40 and 50% of the students who start out to get a bachelor's degree actually end up with that degree in a timely fashion, and the numbers are quite a bit lower if you're at a community college seeking an associate degree. There are huge equity gaps between students from different backgrounds. Depending upon the measures you're looking at and the exact dataset you're using, you could be 10, 20, even 30 points more likely to achieve a degree on time if you are a white, middle or upper income student when compared to a Black lower income student.

[NEW_PARAGRAPH]Well, we all know morally that shouldn't be the way it is. We shouldn't be dispensing one of the most valuable tools that an individual can possess. We've got a problem as a nation we need to solve, which is bringing more students to the point of having a meaningful post-secondary credential and making sure that students from all different demographic backgrounds have an equal opportunity to achieve that kind of goal.

Jason Altmire [\(10:15\)](#):

It would be tempting when you hear the word institute at a university to think this is just one of these think tanks that's pumping out studies and doing research and writing articles. You do some of that, but that's really not the mission of what you do. What you do is you go out and you work with schools, you work with community colleges, HBCUs, all types of colleges and universities to help them identify where they're struggling and what they can do to get better. How do you approach that aspect of it, the external part?

Dr. Timothy Renick [\(10:49\)](#):

The external role for the NISS really its founding rationale, and it came at a practical need. Prior to the pandemic, we had been visited at Georgia State by campus teams from over 500 different institutions from across the US and increasingly from across the globe. People from New Zealand and South Africa and The Netherlands and Korea and so forth came to Georgia State, but specifically to our student success teams to try to figure out how to implement these programs.

[\(11:19\)](#):

They were convinced and there is convincing data out there that supports the effectiveness of using predictive analytics and advising or using data to award microgrants or the effectiveness of chatbot technology to communicate to college students and helping them navigate the bureaucracies and the many hurdles that they face and so forth. There's evidence out there, in many cases, randomized control trials that we helped lead at Georgia State, but there wasn't enough know-how about how to actually implement these programs.

[\(11:50\)](#):

On their own dime, these campuses would send teams of five, six. In some cases, we had 10 people from a single campus coming to visit with us, which was great. It was flattering for us to be asked these questions and want to know about what was going on, and hopefully we imparted some good information, but it wasn't enough. Learning how to do predictive analytics or use AI responsibly is not something you can accomplish in a one-day visit.

[\(12:17\)](#):

What we found was necessary was to conceive of a way, a set of programs that would really help these campuses implement in a meaningful way what are transformative changes. We worked out a model. We had the support of pro bono help from Bayne Consulting, where campuses first engage with us in a diagnostic process. We work with them for five to six months, looking at their systems, looking at what's working and what's not. Not all campuses are alike, and just because something was not working at Georgia State doesn't mean that the same problem is at this other institution.

[\(12:50\)](#):

But we really look at the data, we interview people and so forth to identify where the issues are and come up with a playbook, what kind of things, what kind of changes are necessary to make a difference. And then for campuses that are ready to move on after that playbook is delivered, we work with them from one to three years on implementation support, and we'll work out a detailed scoping plan of what steps need to be taken.

[\(13:13\)](#):

Thankfully, by our philanthropic partners, we in many cases have grants that we can impart to our partner campuses to help them implement the new systems and new approaches that they need to put in place. We track the data to make sure that the outcomes follow. This is a kind of ambitious partnership that we engage in. We focus particularly on institutions that enroll large numbers of low income and minoritized students. Of our initial partners, we're working with about 50 schools right now, about 60% are either HBCUs, minority serving institutions, or Hispanic serving universities.

Jason Altmire [\(13:51\)](#):

Are there one or two areas where conventional wisdom is wrong, where you can go to an institution and just the inertia of doing it the way they've always done it has led them to making mistakes that are easily identified and corrected with student success?

Dr. Timothy Renick [\(14:10\)](#):

Definitely so. There are some what you might call low-hanging fruit, which are issues that crop up again and again and that are relatively easy to resolve. For instance, looking at registration records before a semester begins. This is something that doesn't really require a lot of fancy technology or data platforms and so forth, but making sure that the students are registered for the right classes. If they're registered for the wrong classes, it has a ripple effect in leading to the likelihood that the student will drop out.

[\(14:42\)](#):

First, the students are less likely to perform well in a course that they're not situated appropriately to take. They may not have taken all the prerequisites, or it might not be the right sequencing. But more than that, the students who are dependent upon financial aid, particularly low-income students, are wasting precious eligibility for their aid programs on classes that don't get them any closer to graduation. A simple intervention that we work with campuses to implement is making sure there's somebody looking to make sure that students are signing up for the right classes.

[\(15:15\)](#):

And if not, they're getting them into the right classes before the semester begins. Another really clear pain point that's easy to identify is students who drop or withdraw from classes in the middle of a semester. Again, we have fancy predictive analytics tracking systems now, as I mentioned, tracking 800 risk factors, but you don't need a fancy system to note when a student's registered for a course and is bailing on the course in the middle of the term.

[\(15:41\)](#):

If you've done your homework as an institution with regard to my first recommendation, which is making sure that students are in the right classes, then if they're bailing on the course in the middle of the semester, something's going on. They're either overwhelmed academically, or they've got some crisis in their life, but something unanticipated is happening. The reality is when we look at our partner campuses, probably under 5% actually take that point and systematically reach out for the student at that moment and say, "Okay, what's going on? How can we help?"

[\(16:11\)](#):

What we've found historically at Georgia State is that in over 50% of the cases, if you intervene immediately, you can offer help that will prevent the student from even having to drop the course for that semester. It's something that you can mitigate immediately. But what is more often the case is that campuses don't even talk to that student for six months, 12 months later. And by then if it was a significant crisis, they're going through an emotional issue or financial crisis and so forth, that may be far too late and they may be already dropped out of college entirely.

[\(16:43\)](#):

There are these simple things that we work on campuses on accomplishing. And then quite frankly, there are higher level issues that are important to take on as well. The one we see most chronically across our partner institutions is lack of coordination between silos. Bureaucracies build up different processes and offices and they don't talk to one another, and that's never good.

[\(17:07\)](#):

But it's particularly harmful if you're a first generation low-income student changing your major because you no longer want to be a business major but want to go into nursing and nobody is helping coordinate that process for you. These pain points of transition with students between one major or another or one status or another can be devastating if the campus hasn't done its job of coordinating its efforts across units.

Jason Altmire ([17:33](#)):

It's been an incredibly consequential time politically and in the judicial system for higher education. How do you factor in when you're advising schools about these issues? Things like the Supreme Court decision I'm guessing on affirmative action probably was very important to your work, the government regulations that are moving through the pipeline, different political ideas that are being passed around. How do you adjust to that side of things?

Dr. Timothy Renick ([18:01](#)):

Yeah, we certainly had a challenge a few weeks ago. Within rapid succession, there were two Supreme Court decisions handed down that had very significant consequences for post-secondary work. One was the affirmative action decision, basically arguing that affirmative action in college admissions is unconstitutional. But a couple of days later, there was the Supreme Court decision to basically block the Biden plan for loan forgiveness of college loans. A lot of our campuses that we partner with expressed a lot of distress at these decisions.

[\(18:37\)](#):

But what the decision said to me is that we need to double down on our efforts to improve graduation rates and reduce equity gaps nationally. That the reality is that the vast majority of students of color were not being benefited by affirmative action. Just as a data point, this past spring semester, the entire

Ivy League combined enrolled a little over 5,000 Black students. Georgia State alone enrolled 18,000. Most of the Black students are not enrolled at the elite institutions that had affirmative action in place.

[\(19:14\)](#):

They're enrolled at big four year public institutions. They're enrolled at HBCUs. They're enrolled at community colleges, which historically have much, much lower graduation rates than do the Harvards and Stanfords and Dukes that have been characterized to use affirmative action. If you really want to solve the problem of inequities in educational outcomes, and in many cases, income outcomes across the United States, we're going to have to deal with the root problem, which is the low graduation rates at the institutions where most low income and minority students enroll.

[\(19:49\)](#):

I feel the same way about the loan debt issue as well. One of the sidelights of what Georgia State has been doing with regard to predictive analytics and data to raise our graduation rates is we've been able to greatly reduce time to degree that students are graduating more efficiently in the right classes and we're identifying problems earlier on and correcting them and getting the students back on path more quickly. We've been able to cut a full semester off the average time it takes a student to complete a degree.

[\(20:20\)](#):

We've been able to reduce the average loan debt of graduation for Georgia State students every year since 2016. While these numbers have been going up nationally, they've been going down at Georgia State. In fact, our average loan debt for a bachelor student this past spring was around \$16,000. That's still a significant chunk of money, but it's less than half the national average for the loan debt of a graduating senior of a bachelor's program who has taken out loans.

[\(20:50\)](#):

Another thing we need to do is systematically deal with the challenge of students taking too long to complete their degrees because it greatly inflates the loan debt that they'll have to assume. While the Supreme Court decisions may be disheartening to, in some ways, I find them to be a kind of call to action that we need not just to look and concentrate on the most elite institutions and their admissions policies, we need to recognize that we need to do a lot better job of greatly improving graduation rates at all the places that are most likely to enroll are low income and minoritized students.

[\(21:28\)](#):

You talk about Georgia State improving its graduation rates by 70% overall, but improving its graduation rates for its Black students by 120% and its Hispanic students by 180%, that's what we need to replicate nationally to deal with some of the deep challenges we face.

Jason Altmire [\(21:44\)](#):

I would ask lastly the artificial intelligence question that everyone is paying attention to, and I don't think there's a more widely discussed topic in higher education or really anywhere in society than AI. How does that factor into your work? How do you keep up with how fast everything is moving?

Dr. Timothy Renick [\(22:04\)](#):

It's a challenge to deal with some of the moral components of the technologies we use, but it's something we've thought long and hard about at Georgia State from the beginning of the conception of these programs. And now the NISS, the Institute, is raising the kind of ethical and moral dimension to

our partner campuses. My field, by the way, academically is religious ethics. I taught religious ethics at Georgia State for close to 20 years before I transitioned to being the student success person.

(22:33):

These issues weigh heavily. What I'll say about AI is this, that we don't want to throw out important benefits to AI with scenarios that could indeed ground deep concerns for us. What Georgia State and our NISS partners are using with regard to AI, first and foremost, is not generative AI. We're not using the ChatGPT programs that are out of a novel platform generating new messages and new content and so forth. What we're doing is using a form of AI that helps us with pre-vetted responses.

(23:11):

We've developed a knowledge base of over now about 4,000 answers to commonly ask questions by students. We've had our team make sure those responses are accurate and careful. What the AI helps us do is when a question comes in from a student, identify the right answer in the knowledge base. It's a very different use of AI than what you're hearing with the talk about generative forms of AI. It is a type of AI that's been well-tested over a long period of time.

(23:41):

It's a type of AI that a lot of commercial platforms use, and we're now using it hopefully rather than to gain a profit out of our individuals instead to help them achieve their economic and educational goals at a much higher level.

Jason Altmire (23:58):

If somebody wanted to get in touch with you or learn more about the National Institute for Student Success, how would they do it?

Dr. Timothy Renick (24:04):

Yeah, we'd love to hear from them, and there's lots of information about our programs and offerings on our website. It's just simply NISS, N-I-S-S.gsu.edu, and they can learn a lot more about our programs and there's opportunities to reach out and contact us directly from the NISS website.

Jason Altmire (24:25):

Our guest has been Dr. Timothy Renick from the National Institute of Student Success. Dr. Renick, thank you for being with us.

Dr. Timothy Renick (24:33):

Thank you for having me.

Jason Altmire (24:37):

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