



THE WORK WORTH DOING- HOW AGENTIC AI LETS HIGHER EDUCATION BE HIGHER EDUCATION AGAIN

SECTOR
HIGHER EDUCATION

FOCUS
AGENTIC AI - STUDENT LIFECYCLE

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THE ARGUMENT

Agentic AI does not improve the recruit–retain–engage funnel. **It dissolves it.** The institutions that win the next decade will not be the ones with the best tools. They will be the ones who rebuild the work around human and agent teams, before the performance gap becomes permanent.

01 THE TURN THE FIRST WAVE ASKED US TO PROMPT. THE SECOND ASKS US TO LET GO.

For three years, institutions have poured energy into generative AI. Faculty wrote policies. CIOs bought licenses. Students figured it out whether we approved or not. That wave is cresting.

The agentic wave is different. Agents do not wait to be asked. They monitor, decide, and act. They run schedules. They send reminders. They close loops. They operate at a pace no human team can match and at a scale no budget can justify through headcount.

This matters because the work of recruiting, retaining, and engaging students is mostly about closing loops. Every application needs follow-up. Every at-risk student needs a nudge. Every alum needs a reason to come back. Institutions have spent decades hiring people to do this work and still cannot close the loops fast enough.

Agents can. That is the easy part.

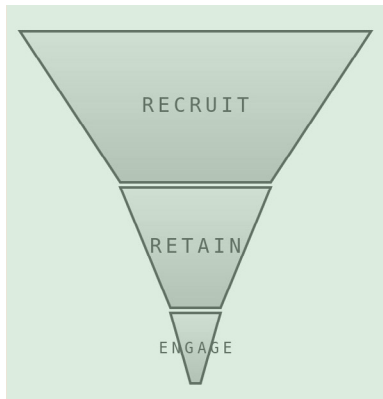
The hard part is this: every student applying to college in 2027 will arrive with their own AI. The high school junior researching your institution today is already drafting essays with ChatGPT, planning visits with Claude, and comparing your financial aid package with three others in Gemini. By the time they become an applicant, their agent will be negotiating with yours.

The institution that treats them like a form-filler has already lost. The institution that shows up with an agent trained only on brochures and FAQs will look like a 1995 website in a world that moved on.

The funnel is about to break. Recruit, Retain, Engage were never really separate stages. They were a convenience for org charts and budget lines. Agentic AI makes the seams visible. Students will not move through stages. They will move through continuous relationships, mediated by agents and humans working together, punctuated by human moments that matter.

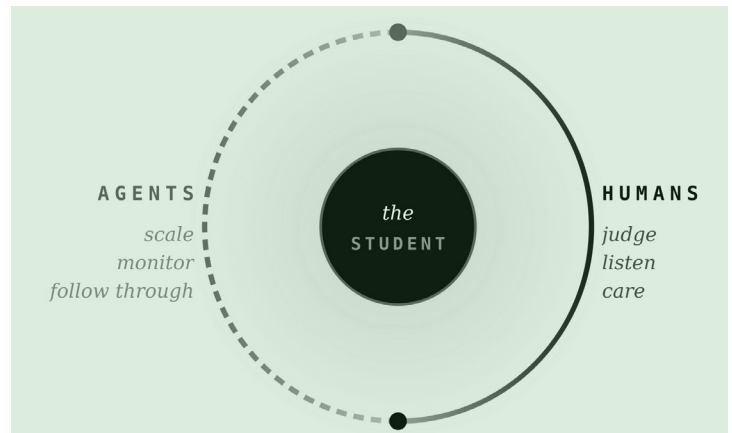


THE SHIFT · FROM FUNNEL TO FLYWHEEL



The Old Model

STAGES · HANDOFFS · LOSS
—— becomes ——



The Flywheel
A Partnership, Not a Replacement

Agents do what humans never had time for.
Humans do what only humans can.

What follows is a working theory of what changes, what breaks, and where the leverage sits.

02 RECRUIT AGENT-TO-AGENT. YOUR AGENT IS NOW YOUR BRAND.

The old recruiting model was built on attention capture. Buy the list. Send the mailer.
Host the visit. Nurture the lead. Convert.

Every step assumed a human on both sides of the interaction. Every step is now negotiable.

Consider what is already happening. Georgia State's Pounce chatbot handled 200,000 questions in a single summer and cut summer melt from 19 percent to 9 percent. That was eight years ago. The agents available to institutions today can do more than answer questions. They can evaluate a transcript, compare aid scenarios, flag a residency issue, schedule a campus tour, and send the confirmation in Spanish to the student's mother.

50%

Summer melt reduction when agents
handle administrative follow-up
GEORGIA STATE · FIELD EVIDENCE

3.3%

Yield lift for on-time committers,
measured against control
PUBLISHED TRIAL

31%

Higher engagement from
Pell-eligible students with
agent-mediated outreach
CLASSROOM STUDY

Now turn that capability around. The student has the same agents. Their agent is reading your website. Reading your Reddit reviews. Comparing your four-year graduation rate for first-generation students against three other institutions. Calculating their real out-of-pocket cost after aid. Drafting their application in your style guide. Asking your agent specific questions your counselor could not answer without a meeting.

This is agent-to-agent recruiting, and it is already here for the students who can afford the best tools. The institutions preparing for it are thinking about three shifts.

Your agent is your brand. The first meaningful conversation a prospective student has about your institution will not be with a counselor. It will be with your agent, in the middle of the night, answering the questions that actually matter to them. If your agent cannot answer “why should I choose you” with specificity for this student, in their context, your viewbook is irrelevant.

Your data is your moat. Any institution can license a chatbot. The institutions that win will be the ones whose agents know things no one else knows. Which faculty mentor first-generation students best. Which residence halls fit quiet learners. Which majors actually lead to the careers this student is asking about. Generic agents lose to agents trained on institutional truth.

Speed and fluency become table stakes. Response time in seconds. Native-language support without translation lag. Availability that matches when students actually think about college, which is rarely during business hours. Institutions still running inquiry forms with 48-hour response times are already behind.

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Institutions building for agent-to-agent conversation will outcompete those still building for humans. This is not about replacing counselors. It is about recognizing that the counselor’s job now starts at touchpoint ten, not touchpoint one, and staffing accordingly.

— The uncomfortable truth

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Business outcomes follow naturally. Cost per enrolled student drops when agents handle the first nine touchpoints. Yield improves when the tenth touchpoint, the human one, is saved for the moment it matters. Pool diversity grows when the agent can meet a rural student in Spanish at 11 at night as easily as it can meet a suburban student in English at noon.

The institutions that see this shift and reorganize around it will build unassailable yield advantages in three years. The institutions that insist the old funnel still works will be explaining declining classes to their boards.

03 RETAIN FROM ADVISOR TO ORCHESTRATOR. THE HIGHEST-ROI PLAY.

The retention problem has always been a math problem disguised as a people problem.

A typical student success office runs one advisor for every 350 students. The advisor's job is to notice when a student is struggling, reach out, schedule a meeting, find the right support, and follow up to make sure it worked. Multiply that by 350 and the math breaks. Most at-risk students get noticed too late, if at all.

Agents do not have a caseload problem. One agent can monitor every student's LMS activity, attendance pattern, assignment completion, grade trajectory, and financial hold status in real time. When a pattern emerges that historically precedes dropping out, the agent nudges the student, schedules the tutor, and flags the advisor for a human conversation. All before the midterm. All without the advisor asking.

29%

Lower DFW rate for Pell students in
classroom chatbot pilots
AMERICAN GOVERNMENT .
FIELD STUDY

38%

Lower course drop rate in
Macroeconomics with agent support
RANDOMIZED TRIAL

\$1M

Recurring tuition for every 1%
retention gain at a 10,000-student
institution
ILLUSTRATIVE · TUITION MODEL

The numbers from institutions that have started this work are already compelling. Public universities are deploying registrar agents that respond to common student emails instantly, freeing staff to work the complex cases. Flagship campuses are building concierge agents to handle the "how do I register" questions that consume advisor bandwidth. These are proof points, not endpoints.

The real question is what happens to the advisor's job.

Here is where most institutions will stumble. The instinct will be to treat agents as a cost reduction play. Cut the team. Let the bots handle the nudges. Book the savings. This produces short-term wins and long-term disasters.

The advisor's job does not get easier in an agentic world. It gets harder. Orchestrating agents requires more skill than answering questions. The advisor now has to decide which student needs a human conversation and which student just needs the agent to schedule a tutor. The advisor has to interpret what the agent is flagging and judge whether the pattern is real. The advisor has to own the escalation when the agent gets it wrong, because agents will get it wrong.



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The advisor who spends the day answering the same ten questions is a cost center. The advisor who orchestrates a portfolio of 1,200 students with human judgment applied at the right moments is a strategic asset.

— On the workforce redesign no one is budgeting

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Business outcomes follow when the shift is made well. Every 1 percent of retention improvement at a 10,000-student institution is roughly 1 million dollars in recurring tuition. Compound that over a four-year enrollment cycle and retention becomes the highest-ROI investment an institution can make. It is also the one most at risk when leadership treats agents as a replacement for people rather than an amplification of them.

The uncomfortable truth: some advisors will not make this transition. Workforce redesign is the cost nobody is budgeting. Provosts and Chief HR Officers who pretend otherwise will end up with expensive agents and demoralized teams, which is the worst of both worlds.

The institutions that invest in retraining advisors as agent orchestrators will see retention numbers their peers cannot match. The institutions that cut staff and hope the agents work will explain their graduation rates to trustees for years.

04 ENGAGE THE 60-YEAR RELATIONSHIP. LIFETIME VALUE, REDEFINED.

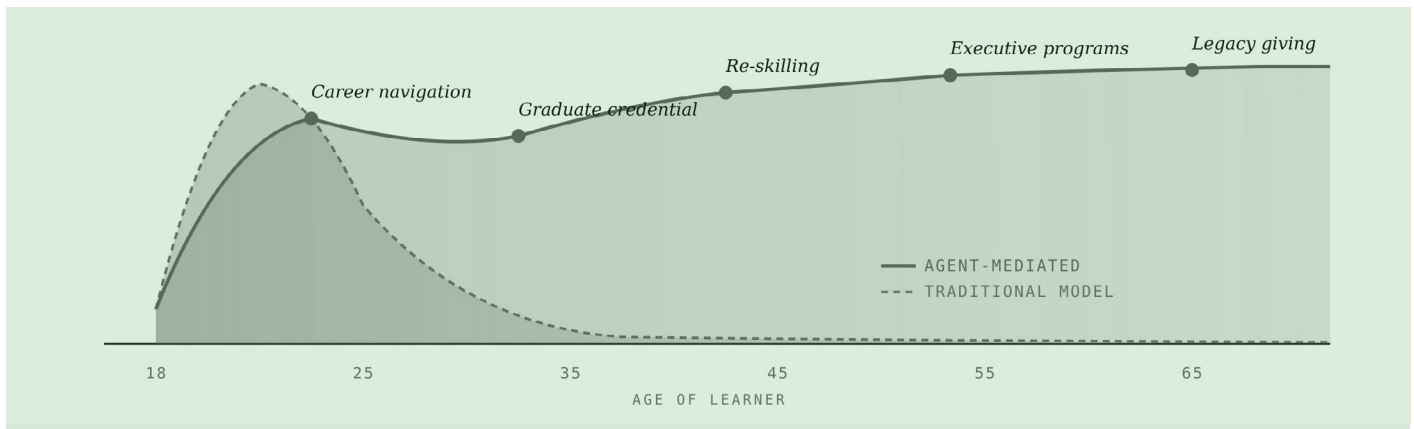
Higher education thinks about engagement wrong.

The current model treats engagement as a series of disconnected campaigns. Admitted student events. Orientation. Career fairs. Homecoming. Alumni giving appeals. Continuing education mailers. Each owned by a different office, measured by different metrics, often competing for the same attention.

The result is a relationship that peaks at graduation and dwindles. The institution spent four years and enormous resources building a connection with a human being, then let it atrophy. The average alumni giving rate in the United States is under 8 percent. Most alumni never return for another credential. Most never refer another student.

Agentic AI makes this model obsolete.

THE SHIFT · A RELATIONSHIP ACROSS SIX DECADES



An institutional agent can maintain a continuous relationship with a learner across 60 years. Career navigation at 25. Management skills at 32. A graduate credential at 35. Certificates in whatever field is disrupted at 42. Executive programs at 55. Legacy giving at 75. The agent remembers. The agent adapts. The agent reaches out when the data suggests the moment is right, not when a campaign calendar says so.

This is not a thought experiment. It is already the playbook in adjacent industries. Financial advisors built their businesses on lifetime relationships mediated by software. Healthcare systems have patient agents that track conditions across decades. The same architecture applies to learning. The institutions that build it will unlock revenue streams higher education has left on the table for a century.

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Lifetime value per alum moves from four figures to six when engagement is continuous and agent-mediated. Not because the institution extracts more from each person, but because the institution becomes actually useful across more of a life.

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— On the revenue nobody is booking

Three shifts make this real.

Alumni relations, career services, and continuing education become one function. The current org chart was built for a world where engagement was discrete. Agentic engagement is continuous. The institutions that keep these functions separate will build three competing agents that confuse the alum and erode trust. The institutions that unify them will build one agent that earns the relationship for life.

Faculty become lifetime mentors, not just course instructors. The professor who taught a student in sophomore year can remain a connection through the agent for decades. The agent carries the context. The professor provides the judgment at the moments that matter. Faculty as co-creators of the learning relationship, not transient transmitters of content.

Engagement becomes measurable in years, not quarters. Current engagement metrics are shallow because the old tools could not measure anything else. Agentic platforms can track learning moments, career milestones, and relationship touchpoints across a lifetime. The institutions that reset their metrics around lifetime outcomes will change how boards evaluate presidential performance.

The uncomfortable truth: most institutions will not do this. It requires breaking organizational silos that have existed for generations. It requires investments today against returns that materialize in ten years. Boards focused on this year's fundraising total will starve the work before it scales.

The institutions that commit anyway will build the strongest agent relationships in higher education. And the strongest agent relationships will out-earn the strongest brands.

05 THE PARADOX THE TRUST PREMIUM. KNOWING WHEN NOT TO AUTOMATE.

Here is the paradox at the heart of the agentic turn. As agents handle everything scalable, the unscalable becomes priceless.

The faculty member who remembers a student's name. The dean who picks up the phone during a family crisis. The coach who stays for the hard conversation after practice. The advisor who recognizes the look on a student's face that no dataset can capture. These moments do not scale. They were not supposed to scale. That is exactly what makes them matter.

For decades, institutions tried to industrialize these moments. Larger classes. Standardized advising scripts. Email templates for outreach. Metrics that measured touches instead of meaning. The argument was always that personalization at scale was impossible without automation.

Agents solve the automation problem. That is the liberation, not the threat. When agents handle the logistics, the reminders, the scheduling, the documentation, the form-filling, the FAQs, the status updates, humans are freed to do the one thing agents cannot. Know the person.

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Institutions competing on automation alone will look identical within three years. The institutions that win will compete on something agents cannot commoditize. Trust is the only moat that compounds when everyone else has the same tools.

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— The only moat that compounds

This reframes the entire investment case. Institutions competing on automation alone will look identical within three years. Every one of them will have agents that answer questions, nudge students, and orchestrate support. The differentiation will collapse fast, the way it did with every previous wave of ed-tech.

The institutions that win will compete on something agents cannot commoditize. Trust. The faculty member who sees a student. The community that knows their story. The campus moments that shape a life. These have always been the real product. Agents make them visible as such.

Three questions for the leadership team.

I **Where in your student experience are you automating the wrong thing?**

Some interactions should be handled by agents because they are routine and high-volume. Some interactions should be protected from agents because they are the reason the student came to you. The institutions that cannot tell the difference will automate their own soul.

II **What is your faculty doing that no agent can do?**

If the answer is “delivering content,” the faculty is vulnerable. If the answer is “mentoring, pushing back, modeling judgment, caring about the human outcome,” the faculty is the moat. Every agent deployment should be tested against this question.

III **What are you willing to say no to?**

Every vendor will pitch automation of something. Some of those pitches should be declined even when the business case is compelling, because the interaction being automated is exactly what your institution is for. Saying no is strategy.

Every campus is, in the end, a promise.

A promise that someone will notice when a student goes quiet. That someone will write the recommendation. That someone will pick up the phone forty years later, when an alum's child is choosing where to apply, and remember the family.

For most of higher education's history, that promise has run on hope, exhaustion, and the goodwill of people who chose this work because they believed it mattered. The agents change the math. They do not break the promise. **They make it possible to keep.**

Build for both. Refuse to choose.

That is the work worth doing.

The argument has been made. Agentic AI is not the funnel made faster. It is a different operating model, one that lets agents do what humans never had time for, so humans can do what only humans can. The next question is the right one.

Where does a campus actually start?

The honest answer is that no institution starts on a blank page. Every campus already runs on a student information system that is fifteen years old, a CRM that survived two cabinet changes, and a financial aid platform whose vendor has been acquired twice. Agentic AI does not land in a green field. It lands here, on this estate, alongside the people who have kept it running. A transformation that ignores either of those facts will fail.

This is the work **Infosys Topaz** is built for in higher education. Not a chatbot. Not a single product. A way of weaving agentic capability into the systems a campus already trusts, with the people doing the work as partners in the design. Three principles drive the approach, each anchored in a different argument the paper has already made.

PRINCIPLE ONE

Build on what the campus already owns.

Agents plug into the existing SIS, LMS, CRM, and ERP, not around them. **No rip and replace.** The institution keeps the systems that work, the data that has been earned over decades, and the workflows the staff know by heart. Intelligence is added at the seams.

PRINCIPLE TWO

Start where the pain is.

Not every workflow needs an agent. The right ones are obvious to anyone who has worked a campus: **summer melt, financial aid follow-up, registrar queues, early-alert advising, alumni re-engagement.** Begin where the work is heaviest and the human cost is highest.

PRINCIPLE THREE

Keep humans in charge by design.

Governance, trust frameworks, and audit trails are **built in from day one**, not bolted on. In a sector governed by FERPA, Title IX, accreditation, and board oversight, this is not a feature. It is the only way an institution can move quickly without breaking the trust the institution is built on.

Three principles, one thesis. **Agentic AI is the right thing to do for higher education**, not because it is new, but because the math of student success has not worked for a decade and the people doing the work are exhausted. Agents do not solve that by replacing them. Agents solve it by carrying the load that should never have been theirs in the first place.



WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE IN PRACTICE

Three campuses. Three weeks. The same shift, made real.

A flagship public university, enrollment office.

The director walks in Monday morning. Overnight, the agent has screened 400 inquiries, drafted personalized aid scenarios for 60 admitted students in their first language, and flagged 12 cases where a residency document is missing. The counselors do not start the week reacting. They start it choosing which conversations matter most. Yield rises. Counselor hours move from triage to persuasion. The admitted class looks more like the state.

A regional comprehensive, student success.

An advisor's portfolio quietly grows from 350 students to 1,200, and her workweek gets calmer, not louder. The agent surfaces three at-risk students before midterms, books their tutoring sessions, and tees up the human conversations that change a semester. DFW rates drop. The advisor's role becomes the strategic one she trained for, not the clerical one she settled into.

A research university, advancement.

A gift officer reviews her week. The agent has tracked 2,000 alumni signals — job changes, industry mentions, engagement with continuing-ed offerings — and surfaced 14 conversations worth having now. She does not chase. She shows up at the moment that matters. Pipeline grows. The relationship work is where the human time goes.

None of these are hypothetical. Each is a working pattern, drawn from real campuses doing real work. Together they answer the question the paper started with. **What is the right thing to do?** The right thing is to give the people who chose higher education the tools to do the work they actually came to do, and to give every learner a partner that does not sleep.

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While AI agents can automate tasks and enhance productivity, enterprises still require deep systems integration, governance, and large-scale transformation capabilities to fundamentally re-engineer how work gets done.

— Nandan Nilekani · Co-Founder and Chairman, Infosys

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The work is already underway. Infosys is partnering with a major global university to modernize student services across multiple campuses, supporting tens of thousands of students and the staff who serve them. The patterns showing up there — the registrar agent that clears a queue overnight, the advising agent that surfaces struggling students before they disappear, the alumni agent that remembers a graduate's career arc across decades — are the same patterns this paper has described. The work is real, and it is happening on campuses that look like yours.

The thesis of this paper is that agentic AI dissolves the funnel. The deeper truth is that it gives counselors, advisors, faculty, and the students they serve their time back. That is the work worth doing.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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Writes on the intersection of technology, higher education, and institutional transformation.
This paper is a working theory, offered for debate.

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