

Transcription for

THE KEY WITH INSIDE HIGHER ED

EP. 39: INTRODUCING STUDENT VOICE

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DOUG LEDERMAN: Hello, welcome to The Key, Inside Higher Ed's podcast for higher education news and analysis. I'm Doug Lederman and on this episode we introduce "Student Voice" about Higher Ed's new project designed to elevate the perspective of college students in conversations about the issues facing higher education. Our partners on this endeavor are our survey-provider College Pulse, which mines a database on nearly half a million current college students to help us all better understand this important population, and Kaplan, the education services company that provides funding and insights to support our coverage.

The first conversation in this episode is with Melissa Ezarik, who oversees Student Voice for us. She'll discuss the project's overall goals and offer insights from the first set of data we published recently, which examines whether and how much students feel heard by professors in the classroom, physical and virtual, and by administrators on their campuses. The short answer is, not as much as we might like. One of the findings Melissa discusses is students' lack of awareness about where they might turn if and when they have concerns to raise, especially when they're not on the physical campus.

MELISSA EZARIK: Students do need a better understanding of various offices on campus. We found that half of students are just slightly or not at all confident if they had to raise an issue they would even know which department could address it.

DOUG LEDERMAN: Next, Melissa and I bring into the conversation Matthew To, a fourth-year student at California State Polytechnic University at Pomona. Matthew talks about some of the reasons why students may not speak out to campus officials when they have issues to raise. The survey suggested the some students don't necessarily expect that they'll be listened to. But Matthew offers another potential explanation.

MATTHEW TO: I know many students that have part-time jobs, internships, involved in multiple clubs, so allocating their resources in that department rather than having the sentiment of feeling heard.

DOUG LEDERMAN: Before we dive into the episode, a quick nudge to encourage you to subscribe to The Key on your favorite podcast platform. We're really gratified by how many of you are listening each week and that our numbers are growing. Please help keep it going by subscribing and letting your colleagues know about The Key. Now on to today's episode...

Melissa, welcome to The Key.

MELISSA EZARIK: Thank you.

DOUG LEDERMAN: So I'm curious what you hope Student Voice accomplishes.

MELISSA EZARIK: Sure. So, of course, there's many constituent groups that higher ed leaders should be paying attention to, and colleges and universities that are dedicated to their students. So better understanding student perceptions is really needed for informed decision-making by campus officials. So for this first survey we focused on getting a sense of how much students are speaking up and feeling heard. And with that broad perspective, we can now hone in on more specific areas and student views on them in future surveys.

DOUG LEDERMAN: And actually a really good side benefit for Inside Higher Ed is that we've always covered higher education mostly for the people who work in them. And we incorporate student perspectives where possible, where appropriate. But we're hopeful that this will sort of build up the extent to which the website collectively pays attention to students and incorporates student voices and

perspectives into our everyday coverage, so that's in addition to what we do within the boundaries of Student Voice itself. So on that first survey that we discussed about whether and how students feel empowered and heard on their campuses, what for you were the big takeaways?

MELISSA EZARIK: So one piece that really stood out for me was how students generally recognize that they do have opportunities to provide feedback to their campus leaders, so that's great. But they're actually much less likely to believe their college officials really want to hear that feedback. Our data shows that about two-thirds of students feel there are chances to share what's on their minds, but less than half were saying administrators make it clear they really want to know about their experiences.

So to me this points to a disconnect somewhere. Maybe schools need to better communicate about their decision-making process rather than just saying no to a request that they can't meet, or maybe there's a way to meet in the middle on a request.

One example that I shared in the article was about Goucher College in Baltimore. And like many institutions, they had designed their spring semester without a spring break. So students went on about that, you know, and they were picturing how stressed they were in the fall and how much they needed breaks, and they started to express concerns kind of individually about that lack of a break in March. So the campus officials, they couldn't just open up a week off. They realized that would impact accreditation potentially, and they explained that to their students. But they also at the same time trying a way to recognize their concerns. And Goucher leaders ended up scheduling in what their calling the Spring Pause. And that's just two Zoom-free days for students and professors. I thought that was kind of a good solution and an example of meeting in the middle.

DOUG LEDERMAN: So it's fair to say that students didn't express a lot of confidence in or satisfaction with how they are listened to by administrators. Only about a third of students in the survey said that they think administrators will resolve concerns to their satisfaction. What's our sense of why students may struggle seeing administrators as allies or as people who can listen and help them get situations resolved?

MELISSA EZARIK: I think there's a lot of potential factors at play here. One is that change happens pretty slow on campuses in general. And as one expert said, the pace of change doesn't line up the four-year degree. And, you know, students can find that frustrating to bring a big point in and it's in committee for four years, and they don't get to see a resolution by the time they graduate. Interestingly, we saw that seniors, those graduating this year, were more likely to speak up than maybe sophomores and juniors

are. And then in general, freshmen tend to be kind of excited about going to campus and expressing their views, maybe more than they thought they had the opportunity to in high school.

One expert was attributing that kind of dip at junior and senior year, they were kind of getting used to things, and they really want to express themselves before they graduate. Maybe they feel the stakes are lower if they say something that upsets an administrator at that point.

Another barrier that was going on, of course, was COVID-related. So many students aren't on campus and haven't been on campus yet. In the open-ended portion of the survey, one person said something to the effect of, you know, it's hard to voice my opinion on campus when we don't even have a campus to go to right now. It's all shut down. And, you know, I think administrators need to realize that is the case and that maybe freshmen need more of an intro to what's happening on campus and what various departments are doing.

That actually brings up another takeaway for me is that students do need a better understanding of various offices on campus. We found that half of students are just slightly or not at all confident if they had to raise an issue they would even know which department could address it. And, interestingly, when we slice and dice the data on this, one group that emerges having more confidence than others in knowing who to turn to is varsity athletes. That might be something to explore in the future. But I think in general, colleges need to take a critical look at whether they're making students aware of all of the supports and services that are available to them. And maybe there isn't a way to communicate about every single office and have students recall who to go to for what, but, you know, maybe there's a general place where students can express that they need help and then be directed where to go.

But at the same time, I think schools need to be careful they aren't making students feel as if they're being shuffled from office to office. We had some other write-in comments to our open-ended questions that reveal feelings of being caught up in a loop and frustrated, but not being able to find the right person to address a problem.

DOUG LEDERMAN: And actually it's interesting when the athletes, and if I'm remembering right, it may have also been international students who felt like they got heard a little bit more. And what both of those groups have in common, but especially the athletes, they have sort of one key point of contact. Athletes kind of know, and I think there are campuses where this probably happens more than it even should, where athletic departments will do things on behalf of students. But athletes kind of know that, you know, they've got a coach or an adviser within the athletic department who can help them get stuff

done. And I think similarly international students probably have something along those lines. The biggest problem may be for students who just don't have the sort of key point of contact. I think you said seniors were sort of more likely to know how to get things done and to be willing to speak out. And that may be from just having learned how to navigate the flows better than some other people, and know which departments, just sort of having learned it over time, either themselves or through friends.

Were there other groups that sort of came away with particularly concerned about or particularly affected by some of this difficulty in navigating or inability or reluctance to speak out?

MELISSA EZARIK: So when you go back to the idea of one in five students saying they have spoken out, yes, seniors are more likely to have spoken up about issues. When you take a look at political leanings, it seems to make a difference as well. People who identify as strong Democrats are more likely to have spoken than those who identify as strong Republicans. And then race may come into play as well. I think it was about 30 percent of those identifying as being of two or more races were more likely to speak up. And about one-quarter of Black students are more likely to speak up. So that's just slightly higher than that 20 percent average.

DOUG LEDERMAN: Going back to COVID for a minute I mean, it's not at all surprising that students may have had more difficulty finding avenues for help, especially when they were virtual. And they have been more dependent than normal, they clearly were more dependent than normal on faculty members, some of whom are probably better and others less so at knowing where to find those help, those areas of help, and helping students navigate to it. But we did, and maybe shifting, when we asked students who they were most likely to feel would give them help, or who they would speak out to, professors rated more highly than most of the other campus officials, right?

MELISSA EZARIK: That's true. And, you know, it's sad when you think about how much student affairs offices and other student-facing services, they're there because they want to help students. Although think in a lot of cases, you know, you may be reaching out to a professor and the professor is referring you to the office that can help you, and that may not have been your first attempt at contact.

DOUG LEDERMAN: So shifting to the sort of classroom side of things, we did some really significant divisions by certain groups and sort of how comfortable students were speaking out in the classroom on discussion topics.

MELISSA EZARIK: That's right. So overall, we've got about two-thirds of students feeling either strongly or somewhat they do feel comfortable sharing their opinions in classes, so that seems pretty positive. That is especially true for those whose political beliefs lean Democrat, another not extremely surprising thing considering that people tend to see college campuses are more leaning Democrat. So we've got about three-quarters of strong Democrats, then about the same of Democrat-leaning independents who agree that they're comfortable speaking up in class. You compare that to those identifying as strong Republicans and it's more like 50 percent, just over 50.

And then race does play a role as well in comfort in speaking up in class. We didn't see as strong of a difference as we perhaps expected with different races. But when you look at Asian or Hispanic and Latino students it seems that they're at most ease speaking up in class.

One difference that stood out is students who are learning exclusively online right now feel a little bit more comfortable speaking up in class. And that's something that we can explore a little bit more in future research, but, you know, possibilities are, when you're alone in a room, it's a little bit easier to click to raise my hand rather than doing it in front of people. Or you could message a professor through the chat rather than immediately speaking up to the whole class. One of the students that I interviewed also mentioned that it's kind of positive to not always have to see your peers reactions to an opinion that you're expressing in class. And that's the case when you're learning online.

DOUG LEDERMAN: It's certainly been true just from some of the conversations I've had with instructors that I've heard several people say that they though shier students have fared better online in certain ways because, and again, even if it's not sort of anonymity of online communication, which can also have sort of toxic impacts as we know when we think about the internet communication economy broadly. But students do feel, maybe it's just not have to see somebody make a face or whatever. But we've certainly heard a lot of professors say they feel like that has sort of leveled the playing field in terms of student engagement in discussion groups and certain other, some people are more comfortable speaking up through writing then through speaking, so there's all sorts of reasons why that might be the case.

MELISSA EZARIK: I think that's absolutely true. And one idea that we plan to pursue in a future survey really are sort of some of the positives that have emerged during the pandemic. That's one of them for some students. The fact is, some students are thriving learning online. And I think they would like to have that option in future and not just have to go to in-person classes. You know, maybe there's a choice that can be anyone, even post pandemic.

DOUG LEDERMAN: Do we have any sort of really good takeaways in terms of best takeaways for college administrators and professors from this first survey? What's your sense of what you'd most want them to think about as we go forward?

MELISSA EZARIK: I think it's important to recognize that you can never make an assumption about what students are thinking and feeling. And one thing that emerged in some of my interviews with some of the students for the article is that those who are leaders on campus felt a lot more comfortable and kind of understood the perspective of the administrators more. And maybe they recognize that most of their peers don't really feel heard, but they themselves feel heard. So I think that getting students more involved in campus organizations could potentially help on the front of getting a student to speak up in general and feeling more comfortable doing so-- and also understanding that administration's going through a lot of issues right now they've got to solve. And there's always multiple perspectives to every concern. And, no, you can't always do what a student wants you to do.

DOUG LEDERMAN: And then if we can tease our listeners a bit, can we give them a sense of some of the other topics that we're going to be exploring in the coming months?

MELISSA EZARIK: Sure. As I mentioned, you know, we are looking to take a closer look at some of the positives that are going to emerge post pandemic and what lessons can be learned from what worked well here. One example is those student-facing departments that were still on the traditional 9-to-5 model on some campuses, now they have expanded hours. Now they're offering virtual assistance. And it would be interesting to see how important it is for students that those things don't go away once life returns to quote-unquote "normal."

Another thing is that there's much more attention given to student mental health supports now. And those are also being offered virtually. So that's been a positive for many people. Maybe that will continue and there's just in general been more attention given to what students need and talking it out when they can do so.

Another topic on our radar, especially as we near the one-year anniversary of the killing of George Floyd, is how students feel campus climate may have improved since then. Maybe there's more or less willingness to discuss issues of race among your peers, in their classrooms, across campus. So that's another thing that we could see ourselves exploring in the near future.

DOUG LEDERMAN: And I just encourage all of you who are listening, if you have thoughts about topics that we should explore, feel free to reach out to Melissa or me, and we'll take them into account and under consideration. Melissa, thanks a lot for taking the time. And good luck and continued good work on Student Voice.

MELISSA EZARIK: You're welcome. Thank you.

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DOUG LEDERMAN: You're listening to The Key at Inside Higher Ed. Be sure to subscribe to this free podcast on your favorite platform, including iTunes, Stitcher, and Google Podcasts.

Matthew, welcome to The Key.

MATTHEW TO: Thanks for having me on here, Doug.

DOUG LEDERMAN: I wondered if you could give our listeners a sense of who you are, give us a little background on yourself...

MATTHEW TO: Yeah, of course. So I am currently a fourth year business manager major at Cal Poly Pomona that's going to be graduating this spring. I've participated in a couple of clubs from a professional business fraternity, entrepreneurship clubs, interned at a few industries like tech, aerospace, and entertainment. And something I've been really passionate about in college is really creating accessibility and bridging the gap for students through technology.

DOUG LEDERMAN: What kind of form has that taken?

MATTHEW TO: So it's really been in the form of job searching. That's my initiative today, now these days, where I've been creating workshop databases, really educating students about LinkedIn on campus and bringing in guest speaker forums now that we have a new age of Zoom and Google

Hangouts, and Discord, and a lot of external apps that we're able to bring guest speakers unlike that thing that we've seen before.

DOUG LEDERMAN: As you know, Student Voice is designed to make sure that students' perspectives are heard in the discussions about higher education that take place on our website and beyond. And the first survey that we did as part of this project suggests that students don't feel on balance particularly listened to or heard on their campuses. Why do you think that's the case and how does that square with your own experiences?

MATTHEW TO: I think that's a great question that's been brought up over the past year, especially being remote. I think it really comes down to two things in particular. The first is really context and perspective-taking. A lot of students understand their perspective how administration runs things on campus communities. We have a set budget. There might be an accessibility gap in terms of funds for themselves personally and from the support. But what they might not understand is how difficult it is from the administration side is that they're given a budget maybe from a private university or public university. And the delegation log from there on out is extremely tough to handle. A lot of administration, obviously, there might be an age gap as well, so up to current skills, dates, things, learning how to code, social media platforms, that is out of scope as well.

And I think the second thing why students don't necessary feel heard is because, once again, I think it's kind of ironic that I bring up accessibility. But it really does come down to that. And many students now these days are extremely busy. I know many students that have part-time jobs, internships, involved in multiple clubs. So allocating their resources in that department rather than having the sentiment of feeling heard is kind of the gap that I have experienced personally.

And that kind of transitions into my personal experience on campus, where I feel like only time where I might be listened to by the administration or the dean of my college or the dean of the school, let's say, has been when I've been participating on panels of boards, through club advising boards with them. I have directly emailed them. I've seen them in the hallway. Showing face is extremely important and understanding that administration might be busy with multiple meetings, I think, schools can do better in terms of showing face. That's something, as simple as that sounds, that's something that a lot of students would request for in my opinion.

MELISSA EZARIK: And now that you've held leadership positions on your campus, so that has short of shaped how you see how much campus leaders want to support students and honor their viewpoints,

can you tell me a little bit more about your relationship with administration there?

MATTHEW TO: Totally great question, Melissa. So one club in particular I think really sticks out more than the other for this, and that would be the entrepreneurship club. And I'll give you kind of a concrete example how I got involved with administration through that. It may have been layered through preconceived relationships, but we were creating a Bronco Startup Challenge on our campus. And essentially what that is, is it's a shark-tank forum. You have a panel of three angel investors, and students really compete for the innovative idea. And that's something that the dean's advisory board really loves and they're willing to give funding to, so through partnering with Kristin Files, who's the operations coordinator on my campus, we met every week. And, boy, do I have to tell you, she was extremely honest of her fervor, her opinions, and her subjectivity to the event! And through that feedback, I think it was a really established relationship and I don't think I've felt closer to the administration throughout my time in college, just because of the residual impact that we were trying to make together and we had a collective goal that we aspired to achieve.

MELISSA EZARIK: It's been a tough year for everybody. Can you tell us what has been your biggest frustration in regards to being a college student during a pandemic? I know during our initial interview, for example, you mentioned it can be difficult to connect with an academic adviser virtually.

MATTHEW TO: One thing I really wish that I had in my last year of college especially is just that interpersonal face-to-face time. There are a lot of things that I did not take into consideration prior to this pandemic, and I understand now how privileged I am now as a student. Like I mentioned before, Melissa, I luckily secured a job offer before I even started school. So there are bigger things to worry about in the real world, but something as simple as driving my car and finding parking on campus. I'm a commuter student and I used to dread traffic on the way to school. But something as simple as that really makes a big difference in your day. And I didn't really realized that now that we're all sitting at home hopping on Zoom calls. That face-to-face interpersonal reaction when you're on your way, walking to the restroom in between class, and you see your fellow student or someone from your club. Or when you're just simply eating at Einstein Bagel Bros on campus, and you're just enjoying living in the moment. Now that that's been taken away from all of us, I think it really hits harder home more than ever since I only have a month or two left of college after this.

MELISSA EZARIK: Absolutely. I know that you have a contact in the dean's office of your business school who you say has gone well beyond her formal job description to support you personally. Can you tell us about how she's been helpful to you, you know, and what it's like to feel someone on staff is there you can turn to with questions or concerns, to just share accomplishments?

MATTHEW TO: She has just been amazing in the sense that she dedicates time whenever she has. I would literally just be able to drop in her office, and she doesn't have five meetings booked back to back to back. She gives it to me very concise. She give it very direct. And that is something I feel like don't necessarily have these days, because we might be sensitive, we might not have context of perspective-taking, we might not have the resources. But just the validity of herself and the confidence and fervor she instills in students, I think that's something that really strikes me, especially being a second year at the time when I have these meetings with her. That's propelled me in my career to take initiative on my own. And I understood from there on out it's like nothing is given to you. Everything has to be taken.

DOUG LEDERMAN: It sounds like a lot of your interaction and your perspective is shaped by the fact that you had this sort of formal relationships through organizations and clubs. What's your sense of how students can find those things? Or is it necessary for students to get hooks in by joining organizations and clubs, and other forms of connectedness?

MATTHEW TO: I think the immediate quick way, if you would like to call it, is through clubs and organizations, because they kind of have empowerment. They have a budget on campus, and there's more visibility for that. But there are external outlets like the Career Center, like Academic Advising, like talking to you professor, and external projects. We have like a NASA startup project on our campus as well, so that's like an outlet where they get more visibility.

MELISSA EZARIK: You've been involved in so many things, it sounds like it's been a great experience for you. Our survey didn't just look at expressing broader concerns to campus officials, it also looked at speaking up within class and within class discussions. You have shared that you've got Vietnamese and Chinese roots. Can you tell us how your race has impacted your comfort levels in speaking up, you know, whether it's in the classroom or more broadly?

MATTHEW TO: This is such a relevant question now these times, especially with the recent events this past summer and the recent Asian American attacks in our community. And at times, it is tough, because culturally, and I can't speak on behalf of entire race of individuals, but from my personal experiences within my family is that, I've always been taught to recessive. And kind of take a step back from a conflict and be very conflict avoidant, right? And because of that, in a sense, it enables me to kind of just sit back in class and just pay attention to the discussion. Over time, may it be through clubs, organizations, or administration, or mentors, they've kind of had to pry it out of my to be more vocal about what I want, how I want it.

And I felt like I really hit that stretch in a recent internship I had this past summer at a tech company where I was just talking to my manager, and he was like, Matthew, I just need you to be more direct about you want, no need to beat around the bush. It's really about context and perspective-taking here. And if you're not providing me the information I need then I don't really know how to resolve and help you out in that matter. And that was a real harsh realization, you know, in the real world that I have to kind of come to, because my whole life I had been taught, the last thing you want to do is just bother someone next to you, and just kind of mind your own life, live properly, and then you will live a long and prosperous life. But sometimes that might not necessarily be the case.

DOUG LEDERMAN: And I guess maybe that last question or two, so maybe advise that you might have to fellow students and students, maybe particularly those who maybe don't have as many connections. And as a student is navigating his or her way through a campus. And again, obviously we're still in the pandemic era, but maybe also thinking about once sort of once people are back on campus next fall, or the following year, or beyond?

MATTHEW TO: I think now more than ever I have realized as a student the accessibility gap is closing. The internet will play to our advantage. You can naturally, organically network on LinkedIn when you're reaching out to professionals that you want to be in careers at. Rather than going to your local career fair now, there's platforms like Jump Start, there's platforms like Clubhouse that are opening up. There are intermediate areas where the accessibility to you and a professional in a career that you want to be in is right there. And that's the advice I would really give to students who are really searching for themselves is taking that initiative for yourself.

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DOUG LEDERMAN: That was Matthew To, a senior at Cal Poly Pomona, talking to me and Melissa Ezarik, editor of the Student Voice. Thanks for joining us today for the latest installment of The Key with Inside Higher Ed. And please come back next week as we dig into a report we published recently on the digital divide for college students, with a particular focus on how it changed because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Until then, stay safe and well.