

# DRIVING

TOWARD A DEGREE

2021

## ENGAGING STUDENTS IN A POST-PANDEMIC WORLD

RESEARCH BRIEF #3



Bay View Analytics

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

*Driving Toward a Degree* is a research collaborative for increasing student success across the higher education landscape. Since 2016, data has been collected and analyzed via longitudinal primary research to understand the state of institutional practices and technology adoption that facilitate holistic student support. The goal is to offer insights to help institutions make informed decisions toward evolving their student supports to improve overall student success, retention, and completion.

This year's research examines barriers to improving advising in higher education and we are honored to have over 2,800 respondents, representing over 1,300 unique institutions, participating in our survey. Each year, we ask advisors, student support professionals, and administrators about the barriers to improving advising on campus. Where we see cause for concern is that colleges and universities perennially identify the same challenges since 2017.

In this third of four research briefs, we examine student engagement from an institutional and student perspective, and the ways in which institutions can improve upon services to meet the needs of everchanging student demographics. While the onset of the pandemic created unique challenges for advisors, it also presented opportunities for innovation in the ways that support staff communicate and engage with students.

### Key insights:

- Providing student support during COVID-19 was challenging; however, the pivot to virtual learning opened a new channel for online support and engagement.
- Low student engagement with technology is the second most-cited barrier for advising; two-year institutions and institutions with higher proportions of Pell-eligible students most acutely feel this barrier.
- Support staff, across all segments, try an average of three different channels of communication to engage with students.

## INTRODUCTION

Over the last few decades, social and economic forces gradually reshaped the demographic profile of students across the higher education landscape. As the population of culturally, linguistically, and socioeconomically diverse students expands, institutions must evolve their structures, policies, practices, and technologies to ensure they are appropriately reaching and serving all students. Beyond the provision of academic rigor, research<sup>1</sup> shows that student supports—particularly advising—play a critical role in students' satisfaction with their college experience and their decision to persist at an institution. Despite this compelling evidence regarding the relationship between advising and student success, engagement with resources and technologies remains a persistent barrier.

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1. Young-Jones, A.D., Burt, T.D., Dixon, S. and Hawthorne, M.J. (2013), "Academic advising: does it really impact student success?", *Quality Assurance in Education*, Vol. 21 No. 1, pp. 7-19. <https://doi.org/10.1108/09684881311293034>

Figure 1

## TOP THREE BARRIERS TO IMPROVING ADVISING

2017	2019	2020	2021
Limited budget (40%)	<b>Low student engagement with advising resources (28%)</b>	Caseloads for advisors are too high (28%)	Caseloads for advisors are too high (37%)
<b>Low student engagement with advising resources (40%)</b>	Caseloads for advisors are too high (27%)	Limited budget (27%)	Limited budget (28%)
Caseloads for advisors are too high (37%)	Limited budget (26%)	Faculty resistance to change (26%)	Lack of coordination across departments (27%)
Lack of coordination across departments (33%)	Lack of coordination across departments (23%)	Lack of coordination across departments (23%)	Faculty resistance to change (22%)
Faculty resistance to change (32%)	Lack of training for faculty as advisors (23%)	<b>Low student engagement with advising resources (23%)</b>	<b>Low student engagement with advising resources (21%)</b>
Lack of professional development/training (32%)	Poor accountability for advising outcomes (21%)	Poor accountability for advising outcomes (21%)	Advisors are too overburdened with administrative tasks (18%)
Technical integration challenges (27%)	Faculty resistance to change (21%)	Leadership's resistance to making academic advising a priority (21%)	Poor accountability for advising outcomes (17%)
Poor accountability for institutional outcomes (21%)	Advisors are too overburdened with admin tasks to advise students (20%)	Poor accountability for advising outcomes (20%)	Ineffective onboarding / Lack of training for faculty as advisors (17%)



\*Survey question: What are the top three barriers to improving advising at your institution? Select up to three.

\*\*Changes in magnitude across the respective answer options can be attributed to the addition of barriers to choose from in 2019 and 2020; (2017 n=1,291), (2019 n=1,339), (2020 n=1,440), (2021 n=1,310)

Sources: Driving Toward a Degree 2017-2021, Tyton Partners analysis

## CHARACTERIZING THE PROBLEM

While the frequency of mentions dropped in recent years, low student engagement is perennially a top barrier to improving advising. Advisors still report low student engagement, even though the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in a surge in the number of students seeking support. In a survey conducted by Blackboard in January 2021, students indicated that Financial Aid (65%), Advising (40%), and Mental Health (39%) had the greatest impact on their ability to stay enrolled at their institution.<sup>2</sup> This data further corroborates existing evidence on the correlation between student supports and students' likelihood of returning to their institution the following academic year, especially as it pertains to incoming and first-year students.<sup>3</sup>

In the *Driving Toward a Degree* 2021 survey, we asked administrators, advisors, and other student support staff to describe their experience providing support during the COVID-19 pandemic using one word. Understandably, most respondents described their experience as “challenging, difficult, or stressful,” as they navigated the unprecedented shift to remote learning and increased demand for services. However, others found silver linings in the positive transformations accelerated by the pandemic:

2. Blackboard. (2021). Student Perceptions and Expectations of Support Services in Higher Education.

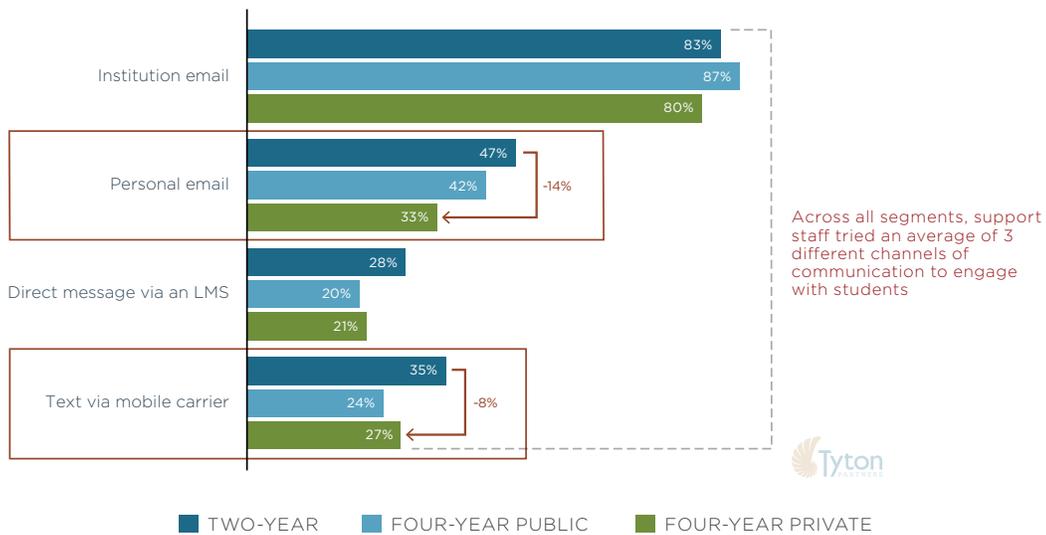
<https://content.blackboard.com/student-support-perceptions-survey#>

3. Steingass, S.J. and Seth Sykes. (2008). “Centralizing Advising to Improve Student Outcomes. Association of American Colleges & Universities (AAC&U). <https://www.aacu.org/publications-research/periodicals/centralizing-advising-improve-student-outcomes>



Figure 3

## ADVISOR METHODS FOR COMMUNICATING WITH STUDENTS



\*Survey question: What are the ways through which you attempt to communicate with students assigned to your caseload? (Select all that apply); n= 2-Year: 467; 4-Year Public: 233; 4-Year Private: 377

Sources: Driving Toward a Degree 2021, Tyton Partners analysis

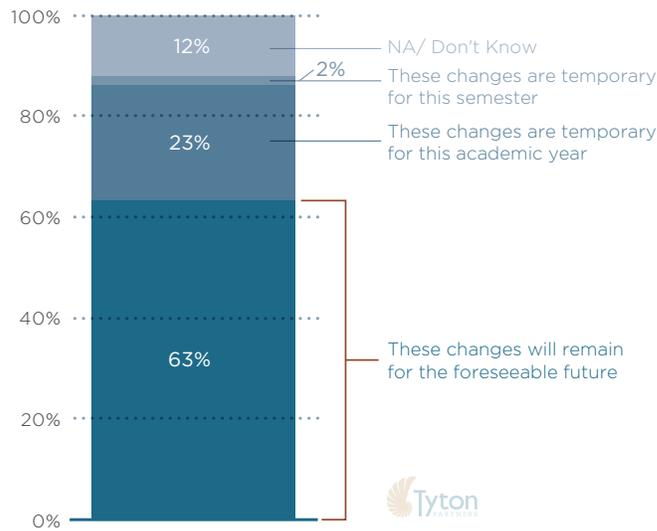
What are the top three ways students believe institutions can improve services? Through 24/7/365 access, faster delivery, and easier navigation; these top areas are all copesetic with increased leverage of technology.

## ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY

In spring 2020, as courses shifted to a remote setting, so did student supports. Over 80% of institutions increased their use of virtual advising, relying on video conferencing technologies to facilitate engagement with students. Seeing value in this new channel, two-thirds of respondents believe virtual supports—and the technologies, policies, and practices that facilitate them—will remain a permanent fixture of higher education beyond the pandemic.

Figure 4

## FUTURE OF INCREASED RELIANCE ON VIRTUAL STUDENT SUPPORTS



\*Survey question: Beyond the current academic semester, do you think the increased use of virtual support will be temporary or permanent? n=930

Sources: Driving Toward a Degree 2021, Tyton Partners analysis

Popular providers—such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and Google Meet—received positive net promoter scores (NPS), a proxy for user satisfaction, but there are no clear winners given how frequently more than one provider is used at a single institution; roughly 75% of institutions report use of two or more providers.

Students were likewise satisfied with the quality of supports they received since the onset of the pandemic. The Blackboard survey found that 38% of students felt supports offered by their institution improved compared to pre-COVID-19.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, 52% of students were satisfied with the level of support they received from their institution.<sup>5</sup>

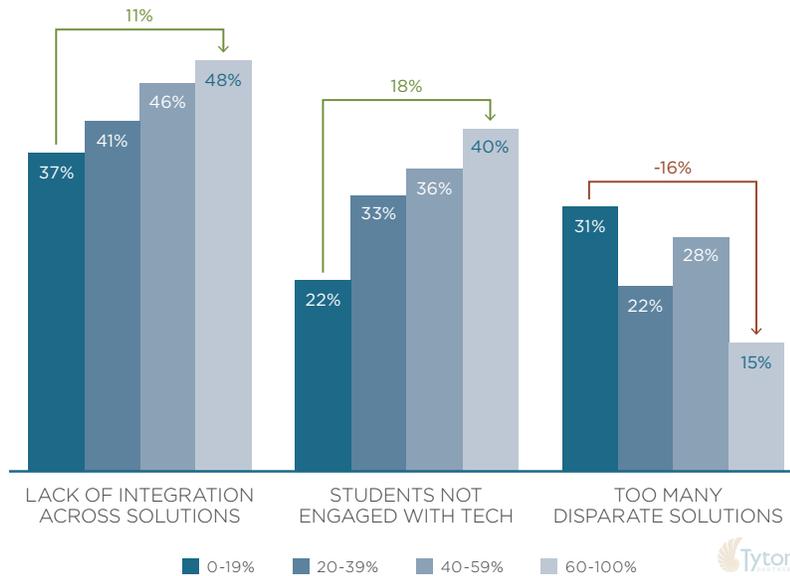
While students viewed their experience with virtual supports favorably, institutional stakeholders report low student engagement with technology as one of the top three barriers for advising technology. Yet, low student engagement with technology as a barrier is not evenly felt across institutions; it is most acutely felt by students at two-year institutions. Similarly, institutions that serve the highest proportions of Pell-eligible students feel this pain with an 18-percentage point difference in magnitude over institutions that serve less than 20% Pell-eligible students.

4. Blackboard. (2021). Student Perceptions and Expectations of Support Services in Higher Education. <https://content.blackboard.com/student-support-perceptions-survey#>

5. Ibid

Figure 5

### TOP BARRIERS TO ADVISING TECHNOLOGY\*, BY PERCENT PELL-ELIGIBLE



\*Survey question: What are the top three barriers for advising technology used at your institution? (0-19% n= 110), (20-39% n= 670), (40-59% n= 327), (60-100% n= 65)

Sources: Driving Toward a Degree 2021, Tyton Partners analysis

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, while student engagement remains a perennial barrier to improving advising, there remains optimism that the emergent virtual channel will increase engagement between staff and students. To continue to engage students with the supports they seek and through the channels they desire, further dialogue and examination of the strengths and limitations of current institutional structures, policies, and practices is critical.

### STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN ACTION:

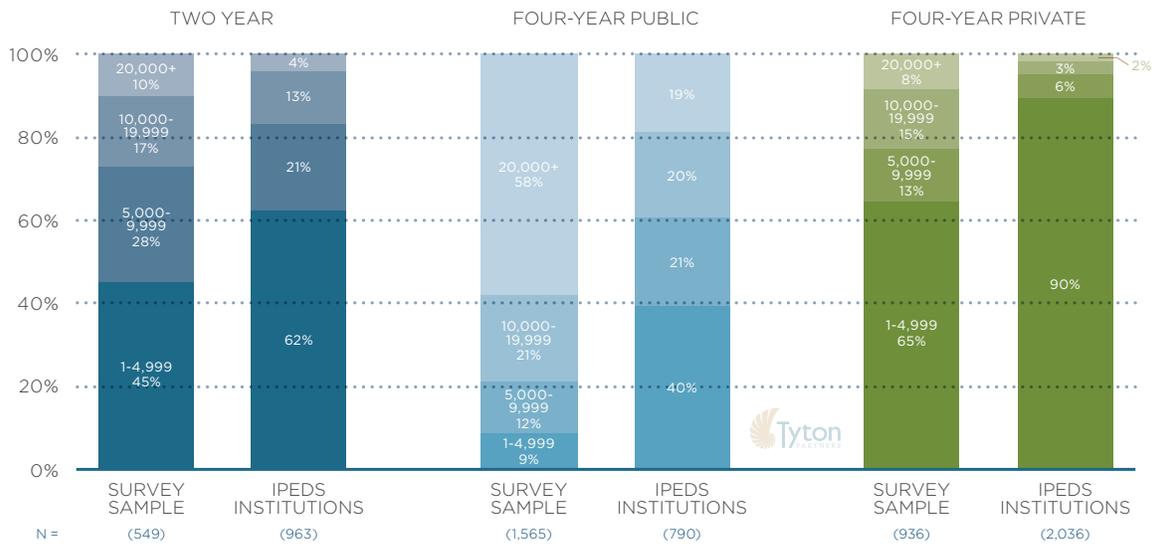
- Beyond the COVID-19 pandemic, virtual services will remain an important avenue for students—especially historically underrepresented and underserved students.
- Where possible, use of students' preferred communication channels (e.g., email, text message) is encouraged; preferences may vary across student subpopulations (e.g., adult learners, Pell-eligible students).
- Alerts and messaging platforms (e.g., AdmitHub, Motimatic, Signal Vine) provide a vehicle for institutions to deliver personalized support at scale.

# APPENDIX

## DRIVING TOWARD A DEGREE 2021 DEMOGRAPHICS

Figure A1

### RESPONDENT DISTRIBUTION BY INSTITUTION TYPE AND SIZE, 2021

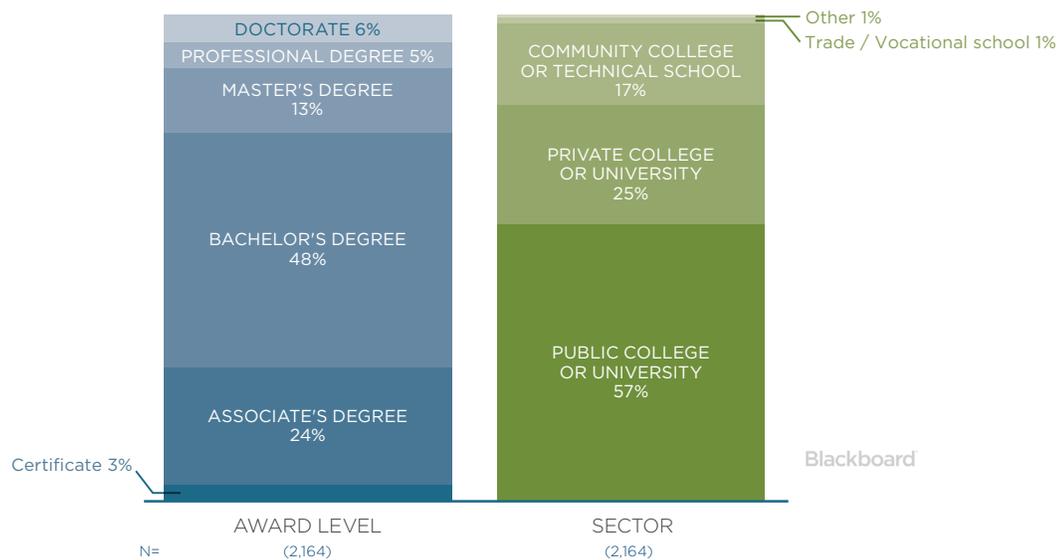


Sources: IPEDS, Driving Toward a Degree 2021, Tyton Partners analysis

## BLACKBOARD SURVEY DEMOGRAPHICS

Figure A2

### RESPONDENT DISTRIBUTION BY AWARD LEVEL AND INSTITUTION TYPE, 2021



Source: Blackboard. (2021). Student Perceptions and Expectations of Support Services in Higher Education. <https://content.blackboard.com/student-support-perceptions-survey#>

## METHODOLOGY

Information for this research brief comes from a national survey of higher education administrators and advisors—including faculty. The survey was distributed through the help of the following partners: Achieving the Dream (ATD), NACADA: The Global Community for Academic Advising, NASPA - Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education, Complete College America, EDUCAUSE, and the Reinvention Collaborative. The survey was in the field from February 2 through February 26, 2021.

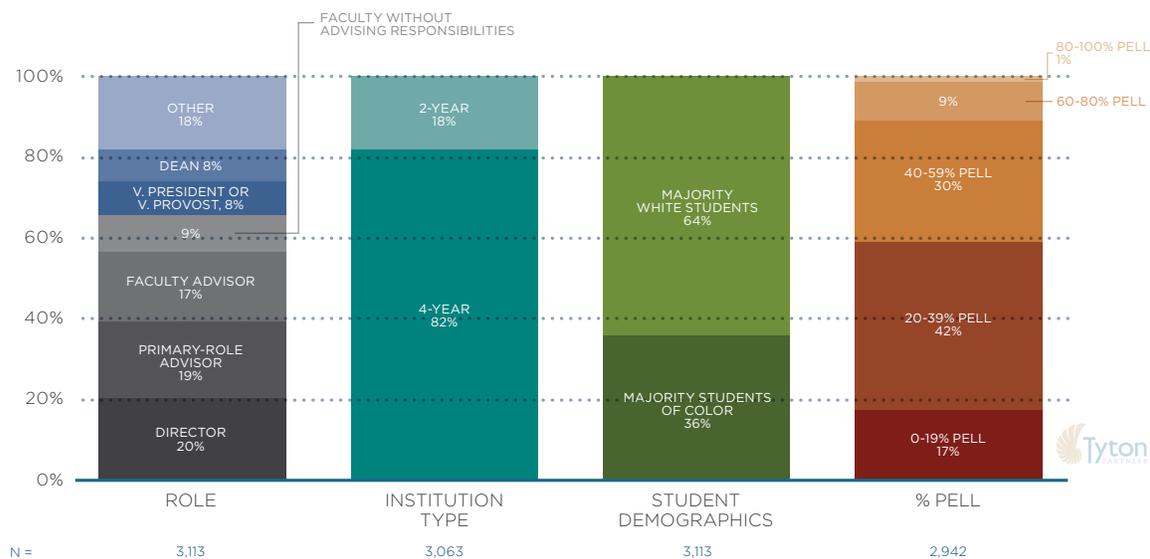
## PARTICIPANTS

For the study, 2,894 higher education administrators and advisors representing over 1,300 institutions from across the U.S. participated in the survey. Participant institutional affiliation was matched to the federal Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) to retrieve institutional characteristic data, allowing for analyses to be conducted by institutional characteristics such as sector, size, and student demographics.

The largest sectoral representation in the sample comes from public four-year institutions (51%), followed by 31% from private four-year institutions and 18% from two-year institutions. The survey sample is reasonably well-aligned to the national sample by sector and size.

Figure A3

### RESPONDENT DISTRIBUTION BY INSTITUTION TYPE AND SIZE, 2021



Note: Other includes: Student affairs professional, Other (Please specify), Provost, Career services professional, Chief Business Officer / Chief Financial Officer, Financial aid professional, Chief Technology/Information Officer (CTO/CIO), Mental health professional

Sources: IPEDS, Driving Toward a Degree 2021, Tyton Partners analysis

## **MATERIALS**

The survey consisted of questions designed for administrators and advisors with roles in the following student supports: academic advising, career services, financial aid and literacy, student life, counseling & psychological services, academic support/ tutoring, and teaching.

## **PROCEDURES**

All data were checked for completeness, missing values, or erroneous codes. All responses entered as 'other' were reviewed to determine if they should also be coded as one of the fixed responses. Data weighting was used to adjust the survey sample size to more accurately represent the national postsecondary education institutions. To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, results are presented in aggregate and summary statistics.

## ABOUT THE INITIATIVE

*Driving Toward a Degree* is a data-driven resource designed to help institutions pursue integrated student supports. Since 2016, data has been collected and analyzed via longitudinal primary research studies by Tyton Partners, with the support of the **Bay View Analytics** and in partnership with **NASPA –Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education**, **NACADA: The Global Community for Academic Advising**, **Achieving the Dream** (ATD), **EDUCAUSE**, **Complete College America**, and the **Reinvention Collaborative**. Contact Tyton Partners ([drivetodegree@tytonpartners.com](mailto:drivetodegree@tytonpartners.com)) to take advantage of the *Driving Toward a Degree* initiative as a data-driven resource for improved student success through supports redesign. To learn more about our organization, visit [tytonpartners.com](https://tytonpartners.com).

We welcome the opportunity to help institutions and suppliers alike address the gaps in their policies, practices, and technological products, and to assess current capabilities and identify future needs. To learn more and access other research briefs in this series or prior year studies, visit [drivetodegree.org](https://drivetodegree.org).

We also invite you to share this series and your perspective on holistic student supports via the Twitter hashtag [#drivetodegree](https://twitter.com/drivetodegree).

This publication was created with feedback from the **Advising Success Network** (ASN). ASN is a dynamic network of five organizations partnering to engage institutions in holistic advising redesign to advance success for Black, Latinx, Indigenous, Asian, and Pacific Islander students and students from low-income backgrounds. The network develops services and resources to guide institutions in implementing evidence-based advising practices to advance a more equitable student experience to achieve our vision of a higher education landscape that has eliminated race and income as predictors of student success. The ASN is coordinated by **NASPA - Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education**, and includes **Achieving the Dream**, the **American Association of State Colleges and Universities**, **EDUCAUSE**, **NACADA: The Global Community for Academic Advising**, and the **National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition**.

*Driving toward a Degree* and the Advising Success Network are made possible thanks to generous support from the **Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation**.

## ABOUT TYTON PARTNERS

Tyton Partners is the leading provider of investment banking and strategy consulting services to the education sector and leverages its deep transactional and advisory experience to support a range of clients, including companies, foundations, institutions, and investors.

In higher education, Tyton Partners' consulting practice offers a unique spectrum of services to support institutions, foundations, nonprofit organizations, and companies in developing and implementing strategies for revenue diversification and growth, student persistence and success, and innovations in teaching and learning.

In September 2020, Tyton Partners launched the Center for Higher Education Transformation. Building on 10+ years of experience, scores of engagements in higher education, and hands-on executive experience, the Center offers advisory services for institutions seeking transformational impact. Tyton's advisory offerings enable mergers and affiliations, revenue growth and diversification, transformative partnerships and creative capital access for all types and sizes of institutions.

For more information about Tyton Partners, visit [tytonpartners.com](https://tytonpartners.com) or follow us at [@TytonPartners](https://twitter.com/TytonPartners).

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