Creating a Data-Driven and Proactive Student Support System with Dr. Regine Criser and Lynne Horgan

Guests:

- Dr. Regine Criser, Director of Student Success, University of North Carolina Asheville

- Lynne Horgan, University Registrar, University of North Carolina Asheville

- Host: Katy Oliveira

[00:00:00 – 00:00:29] – Katy Oliveira
 In this episode, I'm talking with Dr. Regine Criser, Director of Student Success, and Lynne Horgan, University Registrar at the University of North Carolina Asheville. We discuss how UNC Asheville is using proactive student success and advising strategies alongside technology to ensure that they are not just responsive to student needs, but also proactively supporting students throughout their college experience.

[00:00:29 – 00:00:58] – Katy Oliveira
 We also talk about how laying a strong proactive success foundation—alongside having technology in place to help you stay connected and proactive—helped them respond to the devastating flooding Asheville experienced during Hurricane Helene. They also share why it's essential for academic advising and the registrar's office to partner closely—and why that partnership matters.

[00:00:58 – 00:01:25] – Katy Oliveira
 Dr. Regine Criser is the Director of Student Success and a Professor of German at UNC Asheville. After joining the university as a faculty member in 2023, she moved into the role of Director of Student Success. In that position, she co-leads UNCA's academic success efforts together with Lynne Horgan and oversees the Office of Advising, the Writing Center, and Peer Tutoring.

[00:01:25 – 00:01:48] – Katy Oliveira
 With more than 25 years of higher education experience, Lynne Horgan moved through the student records world to the registrar position at Adelphi University in New York. She joined UNC Asheville as University Registrar in fall 2015. Her professional passion is finding ways to improve navigation for students, staff, and faculty.

[00:01:48 – 00:02:04] – Katy Oliveira
 Before we dive in, please subscribe to the show for the latest in data-informed approaches to student impact.

[00:02:04 – 00:02:24] – Katy Oliveira
 Welcome to *Next Practices*. I'm so glad you're here. Thank you so much for joining today to share how your institution is helping students thrive and succeed.

[00:02:24 – 00:02:51] – Dr. Regine Criser
 Thanks so much for having us—it's great to be here.
 UNC Asheville is nestled in the Blue Ridge Mountains. We're the designated public liberal arts and sciences university of the UNC system. We serve primarily North Carolinians but also a strong group of out-of-state students. I'm the Director of Student Success here, working together with Lynne to lead our academic success initiatives, including the Office of Advising, the Registrar's Office, the Writing Center, and Peer Tutoring.

[00:02:51 – 00:03:10] – Lynne Horgan
 And thinking of those out-of-staters—you're right! Asheville's beautiful. I visited before joining and completely fell in love with the area. I'm sure many of our students are drawn here for both the education and the landscape.

[00:03:11 – 00:03:50] – Katy Oliveira
 We like to start with a conversation about common challenges institutions face in higher ed. I know your team recently faced a particularly acute challenge: helping students navigate the devastating flooding Asheville experienced during Hurricane Helene last fall. I'd love for you to talk about the impact of that natural disaster on your work—and also share what broader challenges you've been working to solve around student outcomes, even before the hurricane.

[00:03:50 – 00:04:13] – Dr. Regine Criser
 Absolutely. One of the most common and critical metrics in higher ed is fall-to-fall retention. It drives so many other outcomes. For the fall 2021 cohort, we saw a noticeable dip in that retention rate. So we've been focused on building it back up with a goal of returning to an 80% retention rate as quickly as possible.

[00:04:13 – 00:04:45] – Dr. Regine Criser
 We're also tracking our graduation rates and looking to improve those as well, all in service of stabilizing our enrollment overall. We've historically done a good job responding when we know a student is in need, but we've been working hard to expand our proactive support—reaching out before students hit a crisis point.

[00:04:45 – 00:05:09] – Dr. Regine Criser
 In the immediate aftermath of the flooding, our focus shifted to day-to-day support. There was definitely a concern that it could derail the progress we'd made post-COVID. But by the time we reached spring, we could see our proactive work was taking hold, and we were in good shape from an enrollment perspective. That foundation really carried us through.

[00:05:09 – 00:05:46] – Lynne Horgan
 Yes—and the infrastructure we'd built for proactive support, including our technology, our processes, and our cultural shifts, really positioned us to respond effectively. Natural disasters

and other unexpected challenges continue to impact institutions, so being ready—being proactive rather than reactive—is essential.

[00:05:46 – 00:06:34] – Dr. Regine Criser

Another big challenge is managing data. We have so much data, but it's often spread across multiple systems. Being able to consolidate that information and use it in a timely way—especially during the term rather than after—is crucial. That way, we can prioritize our resources and target support where it's most needed.

[00:06:34 – 00:06:56] – Lynne Horgan

Exactly. When data is centralized and actionable, we can make better decisions. We have limited resources, so using them effectively is critical to improving student success.

[00:06:56 – 00:07:18] – Katy Oliveira

And it's especially important to have systems in place that allow institutions to act during the term—not just look at data retrospectively. I know, Regine, you've also talked about how today's students have increasingly complex needs.

[00:07:18 – 00:07:49] – Dr. Regine Criser

Yes. At UNCA, most of our students still fit the traditional student profile, but we know that definition is evolving. More than half of our students work while attending school, which is a huge responsibility. So meeting them where they are—academically and personally—is essential. They come with varying levels of preparedness and capacity to engage.

[00:07:49 – 00:08:13] – Dr. Regine Criser

After Hurricane Helene, we saw a wide range of needs. Some students lost their homes; others just lost access to materials. Each case required different levels of response. It helped that we already had a practice in place that treated students as whole human beings and focused on holistic support.

[00:08:13 – 00:08:49] – Katy Oliveira

That kind of proactive, holistic support can make a real difference for students. It's much better to intervene early than to wait until the end of the term when the damage is harder to undo. I know you've taken a multifaceted, data-informed approach to this. What strategies have been most effective for your team and your institution overall?

[00:08:49 – 00:09:13] – Lynne Horgan

For the Registrar's Office, we've used Civitas to focus on two primary action areas: registration and the graduation application. With campaigns built around both, we've seen great success—especially nudging students to register on their assigned day. That number has gone up significantly.

[00:09:13 – 00:09:46] – Lynne Horgan

We've also focused communications post-Helene on academic policy changes. For example,

we extended the withdrawal deadline and wanted students to see their grades before making decisions. Those policy changes needed to be communicated quickly so students could make informed choices amid other life disruptions.

[00:09:46 – 00:10:24] – Dr. Regine Criser
On the advising side, we use academic alerts submitted by faculty to identify students facing academic challenges. We've worked hard to build a culture where faculty are the first point of contact and engage the student, but they can also flag concerns for us. When an alert comes in, our team looks at the whole student picture to decide the best course of support.

[00:10:24 – 00:10:44] – Dr. Regine Criser
Sometimes, it's just a gentle nudge to reconnect with a professor. Other times, it's more in-depth support with a student success specialist who can coordinate a broader set of resources.

[00:10:44 – 00:11:18] – Dr. Regine Criser
We also have targeted communication plans for first-year students, who are each assigned a student success specialist. We tailor messaging based on engagement and data—so, for example, if we're promoting the Writing Center, we target students currently in writing courses or on academic warning. We want every message to be timely and relevant.

[00:11:18 – 00:11:55] – Dr. Regine Criser
One game-changer during the hurricane was the ability to text all our students through one platform. We didn't have anything else that could have done that at scale. We used our analytics tools to create a list, sent a mass text with a Google Form, and had students check in. That let us focus our time on responding instead of scrambling to reach students one by one.

[00:11:55 – 00:12:24] – Katy Oliveira
That's huge. Having the ability to act quickly and prioritize outreach—then take action and document it in a shared system—is incredibly powerful. I know from my advising background how often we end up only serving the students who raise their hand. That leaves others unseen. Tools like these give you visibility into every student, not just the loudest ones.

[00:12:24 – 00:12:56] – Dr. Regine Criser
Absolutely. It's helped us prioritize more effectively. We've always had a strong commitment to serving all students, but there are only so many hours in a day. This helps us make informed decisions—like which ten students need attention today based on what we're seeing in the data. We can consider everything we know about them as human beings and engage with care and compassion.

[00:12:56 – 00:13:18] – Katy Oliveira
And beyond strategy, there's often a lot that happens internally—within the team, the organization, and across committees. What types of people, processes, or technologies have you implemented in recent years to support this student-centered approach?

[00:13:18 – 00:13:38] – Dr. Regine Criser
 We have a Strategic Enrollment Management Committee that includes the Provost, Student Affairs, Registrar, Finance, Institutional Research, Admissions, and others. It brings together everyone with a stake in enrollment and student success, and we've had it in this form for about two and a half years.

[00:13:38 – 00:14:01] – Dr. Regine Criser
 That group has helped us create a unified vision that informs each area's priorities. On our advising team, it guides the goals we set for student success initiatives. We meet weekly to track progress and discuss barriers and opportunities to meet our goals.

[00:14:01 – 00:14:27] – Dr. Regine Criser
 I'd also highlight our leadership structure. At UNCA, the Registrar and the Director of Student Success co-lead the Academic Success Center. I don't know how common that is, but I think it's been incredibly helpful. Lynne and I bring different perspectives, and that allows us to approach challenges and systems holistically.

[00:14:27 – 00:14:54] – Dr. Regine Criser
 Together, we've been able to surface barriers, lift up successes, and fine-tune the infrastructure to better support students. That structure—and our use of Civitas over the last few years—has really helped us move toward our goals.

[00:14:54 – 00:15:14] – Lynne Horgan
 I agree. Our collaboration is unique. In my previous institution, advising was housed in Student Affairs and operated completely separately from the Registrar's Office. I didn't realize how limiting that structure was until I experienced what's possible here.

[00:15:14 – 00:15:37] – Lynne Horgan
 Now, we're able to spot barriers on the Registrar's side and share them with advising so they can better support students. And they share insights with us from their conversations with students—like if something's confusing in our systems—so we can address it. That feedback loop has been incredibly valuable.

[00:15:37 – 00:16:20] – Dr. Regine Criser
 At a macro level, our analytics data helps us identify groups of students who could benefit from outreach or support—or even just helps guide our curiosity. It points us to where we need to dig deeper and combine other data sources to better understand what's happening. On the advising side, our specialists use dashboards daily to prioritize who needs outreach.

[00:16:20 – 00:16:48] – Dr. Regine Criser
 As directors, we have a super-view—we can see all students and look for shifts or red flags. If someone keeps showing up on our radar but no one's connected yet, we can follow up with a team member or faculty and ask, "Have you heard from this student recently?"

[00:16:48 – 00:17:20] – Katy Oliveira
 Right. It's not just about serving students more effectively—it's also about uncovering systemic

or structural barriers we might not even realize are there. For example, maybe a particular required course outside a department's control is a bottleneck. When you have a holistic view, you can spot those cross-departmental challenges.

[00:17:20 – 00:17:47] – Dr. Regine Criser
 Yes! We've just started those conversations, and they've already been eye-opening. They help us better understand what's happening in those courses and what support students might need—whether that's embedded tutoring, workshops, or just better-timed messaging.

[00:17:47 – 00:18:14] – Katy Oliveira
 That kind of data-informed collaboration allows you to fine-tune your support strategy and meet students where they are. As we wrap up, I want to give you a chance to brag. What successes are you especially proud of? What feels easier now? What goals are you making progress toward?

[00:18:14 – 00:18:38] – Lynne Horgan
 One huge win is registration timing. We're now seeing 90 to 95% of students registering on their assigned day—that's across class standings. I really credit that to the way we've used nudges and the timing of our outreach.

[00:18:38 – 00:19:07] – Lynne Horgan
 Another win is during academic standing review. There's always a group of students who are borderline—where we're not sure what decision best serves them. Now, I can sit down with Regine, look at the Civitas data, see who's been engaged, read advisor notes, and make a more informed, compassionate decision.

[00:19:07 – 00:19:35] – Dr. Regine Criser
 I agree. And we've seen the impact of all this work in our numbers. For the fall 2022 cohort, our fall-to-fall retention increased by 5%—our biggest year-over-year jump ever. There are always multiple contributing factors, but I know our proactive outreach and Civitas-powered work played a meaningful role.

[00:19:35 – 00:20:00] – Dr. Regine Criser
 That jump helped us recover from a dip and start moving toward our 80% retention goal again. It was a proud moment for the whole team. The work they've been doing—carefully, intentionally—really paid off.

[00:20:00 – 00:20:15] – Katy Oliveira
 Those are fantastic wins and definitely worth bragging about. Any parting words of wisdom for others listening?

[00:20:15 – 00:20:31] – Lynne Horgan
 Always make friends with your Registrar!

[00:20:31 – 00:20:47] – Katy Oliveira
 Love that advice. Thank you so much, Regine and Lynne, for joining us on *Next Practices*. This has been a great conversation.

[00:20:47 – 00:21:00] – Dr. Regine Criser
 Thank you so much for having us!

[00:21:00 – 00:21:15] – Lynne Horgan
 It's been a pleasure—thank you!