

# FAU's Unbridled Ambition™: Improving Visibility on Student Need to Identify Barriers and Eliminate Their Achievement Gap

## In 2014, FAU was at a crossroads.

With a new university president at the helm, it had become FAU's aspiration to pursue, with Unbridled Ambition™, the goal to metamorphosize into the country's fastest-improving public research university. But one of the great struggles in realizing the university's objective was the academic struggles of its diverse student body. With less than 66% freshmen progressing to their second year with 2.0+ GPA and a 40% six-year graduation rate, FAU found itself ranking second-to-last in state's performance funding model. The consequence: the state of Florida withheld \$7 million in educational support.

It's been said that discontent is the first necessity of progress, so with a restlessness that was difficult to suppress, FAU purposefully sought out a solution. With what it dubbed the *Strategic Plan for the Race to Excellence*, FAU rejected the narrative of being an institution with finite student success. Using an arsenal of creative initiatives, which included a new partnership with Civitas Learning (a word-of-mouth recommendation from its sister institutions), FAU prioritized data governance, team-based advising, and a laser-sharp focus on being the destination for transformative degrees.

## Then, FAU began making some very dramatic advancements:



**14.5 percentage point surge**  
in the rate of its 2.0+ GPA freshmen  
going on to be sophomores



**18% boost**  
in four-year graduation rate



**11% boost**  
in its six-year graduation rates



**Elimination of achievement gaps**  
by race, ethnicity, income

**And as a result, within two years — and against all odds and expectations — FAU ranked at the very top of the performance funding model. By achieving this, FAU reclaimed the \$7 million in funding, plus additional dollars.**

## How was any of this even achievable?



FAU was determined to reengineer its academic DNA with hyper-informed teams. The establishment of the umbrella S.W.A.T. (Strategic Workgroup for Ascending to the Top) team broke down long-existing silos, ensured accountability, and served as a persistent

advocacy group for all teams involved in sustained interventions. The cross-functional team, representing finance, IR, student support and faculty, began meeting weekly. Success required more than having the right tools. It depended on having the right people at the table and a concentrated effort to take action.

Pressed to unlock the predictive and Sherpa-like qualities of student data, FAU also formed their CDGT (Civitas Data Governance Team) to coordinate action and ensure campus teams had the data they needed improve the trajectory and outcomes of their students. First, by moving away from often-too-late reactions to at-risk students, engaging with them early, when challenges are manageable and mistakes are still salvageable.

CDGT would work with the core team, S.W.A.T. which regularly reviewed university operations to boost key metrics. A Nudge team, including representatives from advising, financial aid, registration and even campus marketing, was activated to leverage personalized data in order to design thoughtful, relevant outreach campaigns and improve student communication.

Team-based advising was also initiated to include a seamless advising system, an organizational support structure, and a personalized Success Network to match an individual academic advisor, career counselor, and financial aid counselor to each student.

**Now every student would have a team.**





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## Putting scrutinized data in the hands of the teams that take action

In 2015—at one of the most significant crossroads in its 50-year history — FAU engaged Civitas Learning in a partnership to unleash the true power and potential of the university's data. Together, they created a system of team-based analytics for sustained student success.

### S.W.A.T. TEAM

#### Focusing on metric-improvement strategies to support accountability and progress

*Broke down information silos*

*Approached every challenge with Unbridled Ambition™*

*Gathered diverse strategic team of VPs, data analysts, faculty, etc.*

*Used Civitas Learning platform to design sustained interventions and measures to improve outcomes*

#### 1. Civitas Data Governance Team

**Empowering teams with student-level, timely intelligence to coordinate student care.**

- Determined how to make data part of student success staff's workflow
- Leveraged list data, persistence scores, and homegrown assessments to optimize programs and resource allocation
- Transitioned from after-the-fact to proactive interventions for at-risk students
- Created solutions within vendor software that enabled advisors to link to Individualized Function Assessments and students' records
- Measured student success initiatives to understand what works for their students and what programs need to be adjusted to improve equity

#### 2. Nudge Team

**Using personalized data to improve the quality of messages.**

- Lead advisors send more personalized nudges, scaling timely and effective outreach to students
- Registrars and student services are now coordinating student outreach together, and they're able better understand message and campaign effectiveness with short-cycle analytics

#### 3. Success Networks

**Using data to deliver precise, coordinated student care.**

- Launched personalized Success Network for each student that included: *Academic advisor | Career coach | Financial aid counselor*
- Used accuracy-scrutinized data to deliver personalized support
- Created a seamless advising system for appointments and record keeping from a disparate, siloed system
- Began integrating predictive analytics to improve ability to identify students who need support.
- Proactive understanding on which students are at risk — and making sure the network takes coordinated action

## What changed at FAU?

Perhaps most significantly, FAU reported that they were plagued by false narratives and myths about what *their* students needed. When they applied common higher ed trends on their campus, they found out just how unique their students were. FAU also shared that far too often, interventions to support their students were delivered too late — after they experienced failures that were difficult to recover from.

In approaching this work though, they learned that continuous improvement with student success must be anchored in inclusive, data-informed strategies, organizational change, and coordinated outreach across all levels.

#### Their approach led to the following initiatives and action:

- Summer bridge program for incoming students
- Step-by-step roadmaps for all students
- More flexible Bachelor of general studies
- Progressive academic grants
- Retention/graduation incentive program
- Renewed focus on equity impact for all policy and practice changes
- Clarity and confidence in program or initiative impact for their students

**By looking closer at their programs and policies, FAU realized they could begin to remove barriers that they didn't see before. They're making adjustments that have resulted in improved equity and the elimination of their student achievement gap.**

## National model for diversity

*US News and World Report* Campus Ethnic Diversity 2020

*Chronicle for Higher Education Almanac* Campus Ethnic Diversity 2019

*Best College Reviews* Top 50 Ethnically Diverse Colleges in America

*Niche* 2020 Most Diverse Colleges in America

*Diverse: Issues in Higher Education* Top 50 Producers of Bachelor's Degrees for African Americans, Hispanics, and All Minorities