Pioneering a New Approach to Institutional Effectiveness, Change Management & Human Ingenuity Delivers $1.5M in ROI

See how Utah State University (USU) provided its staff with meaningful, data-informed student success insights within an environment of autonomy-supported leadership—all while increasing its ROI.

USU knows exactly where it came from

While the Civil War was raging, President Abraham Lincoln—looking to the future—planted the seed of USU by signing legislation to fund a new college in each state and territory. USU has a strong vision for the future as well: to see that more and more of its students can and will succeed.

USU also has its own battlefield to contend with. In the face of new and diverse student populations, rising performance expectations, increased competition and flat resources, USU, like many academic institutions, is feeling the pressure to do more for their students while it grapples with finite time, money and human capital.

A big part of this challenge is deducing what student success initiatives are working and which ones aren't. USU has always had a good system for gathering good data. But they couldn't see if initiatives were actually influencing student persistence. In addition, USU is an advocate of what it calls Autonomy Supported Leadership—an effort to use data to inform their advisors' professionalism, not undermine their autonomy.

Newly armed with deeper insight into their students and programs, USU measured the efficacy of student success initiatives and received greater insight into how students were engaging in their studies. USU is now doing the kind of targeted outreach to higher risk students that has led to incredible results. In fact, USU's ROI in 2018 was ten times higher than they thought it would be, and more specifically, 56% of the gain was directly attributable to advisor use of Civitas Learning.

Leveraging the Civitas Learning platform, USU advisors can monitor how well students are doing, their involvement with their coursework, and receive academic early-alerts from students' faculty.

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Divining the data: the pebble that started an avalanche of activity.

USU staff determined that early registration was a core predictor of student success—and unexpectedly— even more so than students' high school GPAs. This valuable insight galvanized the executive steering committee to launch a comprehensive institution-wide initiative for motivating students to register early.

Over one hundred staffers united to create an awareness campaign that sparked a surge of constructive early student/advisor meetings. When registration opened, students knew what they were going to do and how to work with their advisors to make their newly-defined path a reality.

A precisely-identified predictor of persistence

Civitas' predictive models helped USU identify particular student-related data and variables that were the most highly aligned with success and persistence. Based on information from their specific models, they found that students with a low high school GPAs who register on-time (when registration first opens) are much more likely to persist toward graduation than students with higher high school GPAs who register closer to the start of the semester. The timing of registration was more influential than academic performance alone.

Early registration equals early advantage in life

At USU, early registration has proven to be a watershed event for many students' academic futures. Students not only get a superior selection of class choices, but USU research shows there are significant psychological advantages to getting a semester plan cemented in advance. Since tuition is not due until school commences each term, on-time registration helps students enjoy the peace of mind that comes from formulating a plan of action.

Uncovering an unseen equity gap

Later when analytics revealed an equity gap, USU was ready to take action. Across the university, USU saw that their "at-promise" students had persistent vulnerability. And, in practice, these students were also being served less often because they were not raising their hand for help or setting appointments with advisors. To further compound the challenge, these students with low persistence predictions have shown to be the least likely to respond to general institutional outreach.

Analytics spark targeted outreach

The Civitas platform helped USU identify the student-related data and variables that were the most highly aligned with success and persistence. It was these analytics that helped catalyze USU's targeted outreach to higher-risk, or at-risk, students.

They discovered that the advising units using the analytics most actively were the ones that were most effective at closing the gap. With that information other support teams began working with these high-performing units to identify the most successful forms of student outreach. Through this collaboration with unit leads, USU was able to fine-tune team expectations and strategies.

Ultimately, this approach amounted to a more humanistic approach where the work became more focused on taking care of the team, so that the team could take care of students. It was a transformative effort that required vertical and horizontal alignment of values--and practice.

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Entrusting advisors to advise

In a way, USU simply encouraged people to do the work they were hired to do. The university incentivized the efforts to close the equity gap by empowering self-assessment, focusing on a return to the central tenets of advising, and providing the tools to equip advisors to directly affect equitable outcomes.

With just one specific advising campaign, USU achieved:

+67%
Engagement
Medium to high risk students
with same staffing levels

+1.9pp
Lift in Equitable Outcomes
Year-on-year persistence
change with equity focus

$150k
in Return On Investment
Additional tuition in 2019
in the College of Education

In aggregate, USU's return on investment for their student success analytics work totals $1.5m.

No Silver Bullets for Student Success

For USU, analytics creates a feedback loop to help determine if their approach to facilitating student success is paying off. It ensures they're able see--and understand--new perspectives and opportunities to better support every student. It's become a powerful platform to drive institutional effectiveness, increase collaboration, and empower student thriving. But, there is more to this work than just adopting the technology and using data.

USU's success was powered by thoughtful socialization and professional development. Their leaders prioritized the development of a data-literate culture and encouraged human ingenuity. While there are no silver bullets for student success, USU's approach has established a new vision of what's possible when higher ed leverages data science to help students. And as a result they've also unlocked $1.5M in ROI.

As Dr. Mitchell Colver, Founding Manager of USU's Office of Student Analytics, noted in his whitepaper, *The Lifecycle of Sustainable Analytics*, their approach "introduces the oft-overlooked link between these basic psychological needs in the workplace and analytics as a tool for driving institutional effectiveness."

Their key takeaways for success and sustainable outcomes? According to USU, here are a few first steps that analytics leaders should take to steer analytics initiatives and sustain professionalism:

1

Invest in Mature Technological Infrastructure

Socializing analytics in an autonomy-supportive way is useless if the tools are not crafted and honed to actually be effective. Just because tools should not be the center of any analytics initiative, doesn't mean that the quality of the tools is unimportant. Consider identifying tools that are sophisticated and user-friendly, require substantial investment.

2

Early On, Identify and Work with a Coalition of the Willing

Play the long game of analytics by resisting the urge to launch new initiatives with an enterprise-wide parade. Start every analytics initiative with a coalition of willing partners that you trust and who will protect the investment by providing constructive feedback. Develop and maintain strong partnerships with individuals in every institutional corner.

3

Trust That People Want to Do Great Work and Use the Best Tools

When professionals resist innovation, it is often because they believe it is not yet tried and true. Support professional mastery by enhancing professionals' ability to do work they already enjoy doing. Provide compelling examples of successful adoption and associated results. Involve fore-thinking professionals in the training-creation process and spotlight their successes when possible.

4

Use Data Therapy to Address Common Resistances to Adoption

Spend time with the most resistant adopters. Listen to their concerns and work to create mutual understanding. Provide consistent, stable communication and frequent, emotionally pleasant engagement opportunities. Ask for feedback and respond to suggestions with positivity and haste.

5

Provide Abundant Opportunities to Showcase Successes

Sociocultural change occurs when a large group of individuals demonstrate consistent, reliable results in adopting a new tool. Without opportunities to share success stories, it is difficult for other professionals to see the vision of how analytics can help them be successful. Identify and reward those individuals who are leading the pack in adoption of new and effective strategies of practice.

A Model and Approach for Sustainable Outcomes

Annually, USU produces a Student Insights Report, which dives into emerging trends for current students, faculty, staff, administration and prospective students. In 2019 the report reviewed advising trends, student success programs, high performing, at-risk students, course load, financial aid, orientation programs, and more. Their most recent report features 20 new student insights and was released in September 2020.

For additional reading and resources on USU's work, please see the Center for Student Analytics and related research at **ais.usu.edu/analytics.**

Colver, M. (2018). *The lifecycle of sustainable analytics: From data collection to change management*. Office of Student Analytics: Utah State University.

About Civitas Learning

We help colleges and universities harness the power of their student data to improve student success. We embed actionable insights and applied analytics into connected workflow applications to support the student journey. Equipped with our platform, leaders, advisors and faculty have the tools they need to measurably and sustainably improve enrollment, course success, persistence, graduation and equity.

Today, we support more than 400 colleges and universities, reaching nearly 9 million students. Together with our growing community of customers, we are making the most of the world's learning data to help a million more students graduate.

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> Analytics, when given the opportunity to shine through a sustainable lifecycle, **fulfill the human need to share evidence with others that the choices we have made have paid off**—basic human needs that are not going away.
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> Dr. Colver in *The Lifecycle of Sustainable Analytics*