



EAB

Guiding **Student Choice** to Promote Persistence

Tools, Technologies, and Policies That Support Retention
and Timely Completion

Academic Affairs
Forum





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Academic Affairs Forum

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A Student-Centered Approach to Advising

Redeploying Academic Advisors to Create Accountability and Scale Personalized Intervention

This white paper explores the evolving role of advisors in addressing student retention and completion. Two in-depth case studies illustrate how caseload-based success coaching and data-driven risk modeling can dramatically improve outcomes.



Guiding Student Choice to Promote Persistence

Tools, Technologies, and Policies That Support Retention and Timely Completion

This best practice study applies the concept of choice architecture to student success, outlining how progressive institutions are using subtle policy changes and self-service tools to encourage better decisions among students.



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Top Lessons from the Study

Administrative and Academic Structures Often Obstacles to Student Success

Academic requirements, organizational models, and academic policies are designed without student success in mind, resulting in unintended roadblocks to completion. Because so many decisions affecting students are made in isolation (an additional pre-requisite course added to one major, for example) or with the interests of internal stakeholders in mind (different administrative offices create duplicative and conflicting processes), many aspects of institutional design are unnecessarily harmful to students:

- **Confusing and uncoordinated logistical demands overwhelm at-risk students while distracting advisor time away from in-depth consultation.** Making a mistake on a financial aid application, missing a registration deadline, or failing to take advantage of health services can result not only in student distress but academic failure and attrition as well. Despite the severe consequences of underserving students at critical decision points, universities make it difficult to find and use the relevant resources without relying on one-on-one staff interaction.
- **Students are allowed and even encouraged to opt for slower pathways toward graduation, leading to unwanted delays, stop-outs, and dropouts.** While many students have good reasons to withdraw from a course, take on a part-time job, or leave school for a term or more, many others do so without fully considering the consequences of those choices on their education goals.
- **Rigid program requirements force students unable to meet them into significant delays, financial distress, or transfer.** Limited-capacity, “impacted” majors turn away hundreds of students, who are often left with few viable options that would allow for on-time graduation. Students with enough credits to graduate but several missing major requirements (often transfer students or late major-switchers) face a similar dilemma.

Advising is a critical tool in helping students avoid these problems, but it is limited in scale and scope. Most institutions are only beginning to leverage professional advisors and success coaches to mitigate problems related to student persistence, but even the most well-staffed advising centers can only reach so many students at so many points in their academic career. A more scalable framework for addressing suboptimal design within the university is needed.

The concept of *choice architecture* in behavioral economics provides an alternative approach to remedying obstacles to student persistence and graduation. Students’ choices are made within contexts that bias them toward one or more particular options (whether those contexts were designed intentionally or not). By rethinking those contexts and providing students with better information, stronger recommendations, and smarter options, institutions can mitigate many of the navigational roadblocks mentioned above.

This approach to identifying student pain points and altering institutional design has two important advantages:

- **It allows institutions to directly impact student outcomes while preserving students’ choice and personal responsibility.** The “nudge” approach to policymaking* popularized by behavioral economists avoids the tension between free choice and paternalistic control within each institution’s approach to improving completion rates. Students are encouraged, but not required, to make decisions conducive to on-time graduation.
- **It does not rely on high variable costs.** Unlike investments in advising or reductions in class size, changes to choice architecture can provide a high return without exponential financial investment, breaking the “cost disease” often associated with improving retention and graduation rates (the assumption that the primary solution to the problem of student success is greater financial investment in existing programs known to be effective).

* See Cass Sunstein and Richard Thaler’s 2009 book, *Nudge: Improving Decisions About Health, Wealth, and Happiness*.

Top Lessons from the Study (cont.)

Improve Student Success Outcomes by Guiding Student Choice

While transformational changes to university structure, investment in additional advising resources, and new enterprise technologies will be critical for the next phase of student success efforts in higher education, universities can realize immediate gains at far less expense by pursuing the following three strategies:

1. Leveraging Technology to Scale Basic Advisement

By automating and streamlining key student transactions linked to academic and financial health, institutions can (1) reclaim scarce advisor time spent on basic processing, diverting it instead toward the design of scalable services and dedicated assistance for high-risk students; and (2) significantly improve the student experience by eliminating the need to navigate through complex and confusing processes on campus.

Practices:

- One-Stop Service Portal p. 20
- Financial Aid Tutorials p. 21
- Personalized Status Alerts p. 22
- Preemptive Resilience Exercise p. 24
- Case Study: Mobile Push Notifications p. 25

2. Preventing Delays in Degree Progress

Students should be actively encouraged to commit to full course loads and degree plans that enable timely graduation. Many students, of course, require a more flexible schedule because of employment or personal commitments. Faculty members and advisors should allow for those exceptions, but ensure that students able to accommodate full-time enrollment remain on track to complete within their expected time frame.

Practices:

- Credit Load Incentives p. 31
- Multi-term Registration p. 32
- Withdrawal Survey Module p. 34

3. Reducing the Costs of Deviation

When students veer off their intended path to graduation, institutions should provide a “safety net” to present them with viable curricular options other than significant delay or failure. Programs that emphasize breadth, rather than a narrow focus on one field, can help two critical student segments: (1) students unable to gain admission to a limited-capacity program (such as nursing or the performing arts); and (2) students who have accumulated nearly enough credits to graduate but are unlikely to meet the requirements of a specialized major within a reasonable amount of time.

Practices:

- Withdrawal Redirect Courses p. 38
- Pre-professional Macro Majors p. 39
- Multidisciplinary Completion Program p. 41

These practices address unique challenges throughout the student lifecycle through strategic changes to university process design, from curricular offerings and course scheduling to registration policies and financial aid. Institutions that leverage the “nudge” concept to promote student persistence can achieve immediate gains in term-to-term retention and completion rates, allowing a greater share of their enrolled population to navigate successfully toward a degree.



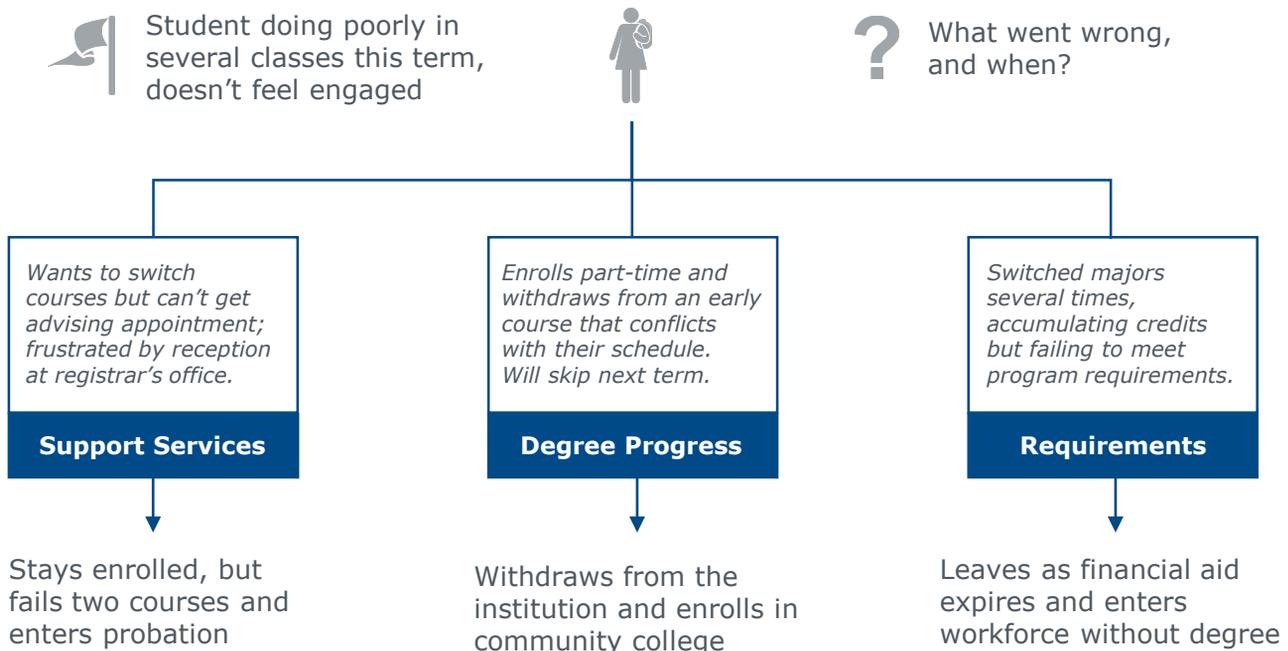
Introduction

Guiding Student Choice to Promote Persistence

The Slippery Slope to Attrition

Seemingly Small Choices Can Derail Long-Term Plans

It is difficult to identify the root cause of every non-completing student's eventual withdrawal, but in many cases, the cumulative impact of seemingly minor logistical or academic choices adds up to severe consequences. Behind the academic symptoms surfaced by an early-alert system (several missed classes, poor midterm grades) are underlying problems relating to labyrinthine support services, delayed degree progress, and cumbersome graduation requirements.



Confusing and uncoordinated logistical demands overwhelm at-risk students while distracting advisor time away from in-depth consultation. Making a mistake on a financial aid application, missing a registration deadline, or failing to take advantage of health services can result in student distress and even withdrawal, but universities often make it difficult to find and use the relevant resources without relying on one-on-one staff interaction.

Students are allowed and even encouraged to opt for slower pathways toward graduation, leading to unwanted delays, stop-outs, and dropouts. While many students have good reasons to withdraw from a course, take on a part-time job, or leave school for a term or more, many others do so without fully considering the consequences of those choices on their education goals.

Finally, rigid program requirements force students unable to meet them into significant delays, financial distress, or transfer. Students turned away by limited-capacity, "impacted" majors are often left with few viable options that would allow for on-time graduation, and seniors missing critical graduation requirements face a difficult choice between additional terms or withdrawal.

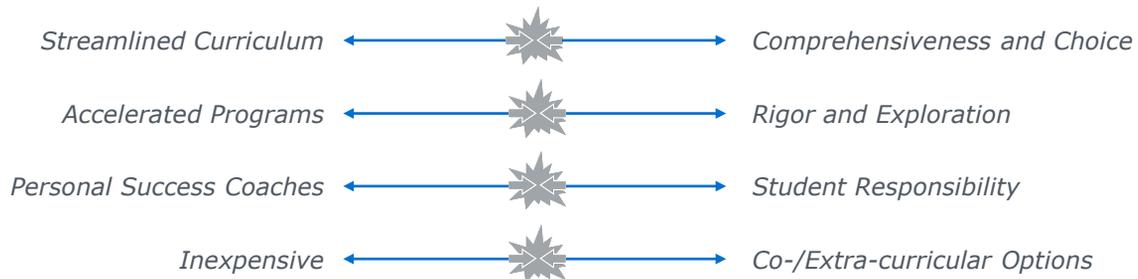
Quantity vs. Quality

Will the Means for Throughput Gains Jeopardize the Ends of Higher Education?

One obvious, though radical, solution to the problem of student attrition is to remove the complexities associated with traditional institutions, creating what some have called the “No Frills” university. In this environment, students would have only a few curricular options to choose from; a strict, blocked timeline in which to complete those options; personal success coaches to monitor their progress; and finally, all this would be provided at little to no cost. As pressure on campus leaders to increase retention and graduate rates increases, many are caught in a defensive posture, struggling to articulate the threat such a model poses to the underlying value proposition of higher education.

The Allure of the “No Frills” University as a Completion Panacea

...But at What Cost?



“It seems to me that the completion engine has hurtled down the track with a lot of states putting in financial rewards and penalties for speeding up completion and cracking down on excess credits. Then there’s the quality engine, still struggling to get out of the shed.”

*Carol Geary Schneider
President, AAC&U*

The “No Frills” university would sacrifice the flexibility and curricular breadth afforded today’s students, the rigor their peers and employers respect, the work ethic and responsibility developed over years of independent maturation, and the co- and extra-curricular opportunities provided by student organizations.

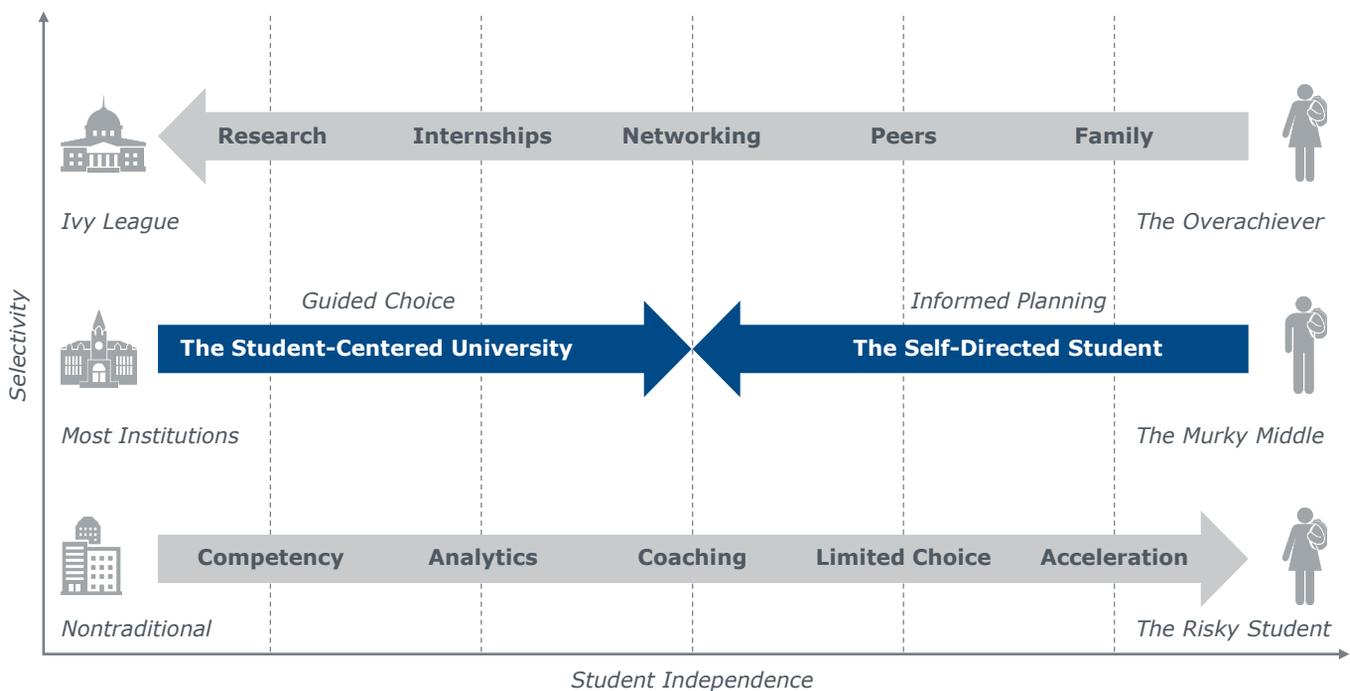
These traditional attributes are not simply reflections of a culture resistant to change—they are in fact the very experiences that allow institutions of higher learning to remain in business. Today’s students, after all, need only an Internet connection to access nearly unlimited, free resources on every subject imaginable. The specialized curriculum, social engagement, and personal development offered by colleges and universities remain worth the premium.

Still, this leaves every conscientious administrator with a dilemma. How can we help struggling students make the most of their education and do everything in our power to ensure they leave with a degree? How much progress can be made without significant sacrifice to the value of that degree?

Meeting Students Halfway

Subtle Changes to Services and Policies Provide an Alternative Solution

Neither fundamental reorganization nor reactionary inaction are viable strategies for improving student persistence. Instead, institutions can realize improved student outcomes by meeting students halfway between these two extremes. The most selective institutions can often afford to rely on students themselves to overcome many of the challenges they will face throughout their careers; highly nontraditional institutions, in contrast, must often invest heavily in wraparound student support infrastructure to attain even low completion rates. The vast majority of colleges and universities, however, have a mixed student population and limited internal tolerance for redesign.



For these more typical institutions, attrition is best addressed by examining and influencing student choices throughout the academic lifecycle. Internally, institutions should look for opportunities to guide those choices with smarter curricular design, more flexible scheduling and program offerings, and incentives that encourage students to persist and graduate on time. They can then take steps to help students navigate both the logistical demands of the institution and the academic requirements of its programs through planning tools, information portals, and academic advising.

This moderate approach has the benefit of addressing unintended roadblocks without unnecessarily removing options from students. It places resources and guidelines in the hands of students while treating them as adults preparing to enter a workforce that demands self-sufficiency. And it provides academic administrators and university business leaders a path toward higher success rates that does not require outlandish investment.

By applying lessons from behavioral economics, a student-centered university can retain and graduate many more students through relatively minor alterations to its structure and service portfolio.

Source: EAB interviews and analysis.

A Missed Opportunity to Impact Student Choice

Applying Behavioral Economics to Student Success

In their 2009 book, *Nudge: Improving Decisions About Health, Wealth, and Happiness*, economist Richard Thaler and legal scholar Cass Sunstein popularized the concept of “choice architecture,” which refers to the design of a context in which one makes a particular decision. The authors argue that policymakers might “nudge” citizens through subtle cues to encourage better decisions about health, finances, and other critical public concerns. Through analogy, this concept sheds light on many missed opportunities in higher education:

Minor Changes in Policy and Framing Affect All Aspects of Life

Framing: “Medium” most popular coffee size, even when actual size manipulated



The Default Option: Retirement plan enrollment climbs after “opt in” changed to “opt out”



Convenience: Consumers more likely to purchase food within easy reach, at eye level



Burdening Bad Choice: Motorcyclists must pass extra test and prove insurance to forgo helmet



But Too Often, Students Are “Nudged” in the Wrong Direction

- Students take “full load” of 12 credits, assume they’re on track for timely graduation
- Students register for only one term at a time, and many stick to minimum course requirements
- Students pick courses from huge catalog based on flawed criteria, delay graduation requirements
- Students able to withdraw from courses, drop out, or deviate from plans with easy transaction



Though often unintentionally, colleges and universities commonly encourage behaviors known to harm a student’s likelihood to persist, while failing to take advantage of ideas or policies that might steer more students to graduation with only a minor alteration to their choice architecture.

Revisiting institutional design through the lens of choice architecture provides two important advantages:

- **It allows institutions to affect student outcomes while preserving a wide array of options.** The “nudge” framework popularized by economics and policy scholars avoids the tension between free choice and paternalistic control within each institution’s approach to improving completion rates. Students are encouraged, but not required, to make decisions conducive to on-time graduation.
- **It does not rely on high variable costs.** Unlike investments in advising or reductions in class size, changes to choice architecture can provide a high return without exponential financial investment.

In the following three chapters, we detail examples of institutional nudges with a track record of improving student service quality and on-time graduation.

Source: EAB interviews and analysis.



Leveraging Technology to Scale Basic Advisement

How can we inform and assist students without relying on one-on-one staff interaction?

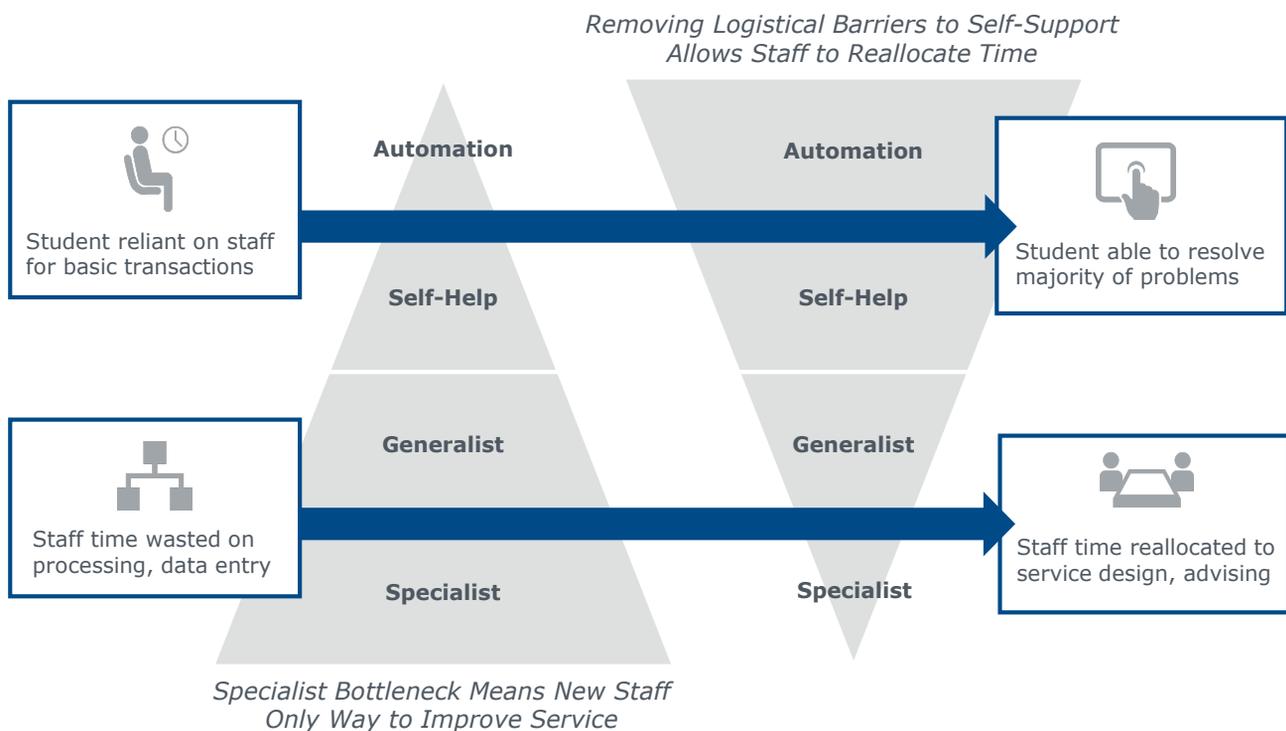
PART

1

Leveraging Technology to Scale Basic Advisement

Free Up Staff Time for High-Value Activity Through Automation and Self-Service

The first major opportunity to improve student decisions through better choice architecture lies in basic advisement. On most campuses, students face a bottleneck through both generalist and specialist staff for most kinds of support, information, and transactions on campus. In this approach to assisting students with logistical issues, registration, financial aid, housing, health services, and other administrative concerns, the only way to improve service quality is to invest in additional staff, most of whom will be too busy with transactions to spend substantial time advising students in need.



Progressive institutions have begun to use web and mobile technologies to lift much of the burden for basic advisement off of support staff, freeing them up to develop and manage those technologies and to meet with students about higher-level concerns that are not effectively addressed through self-service tools.

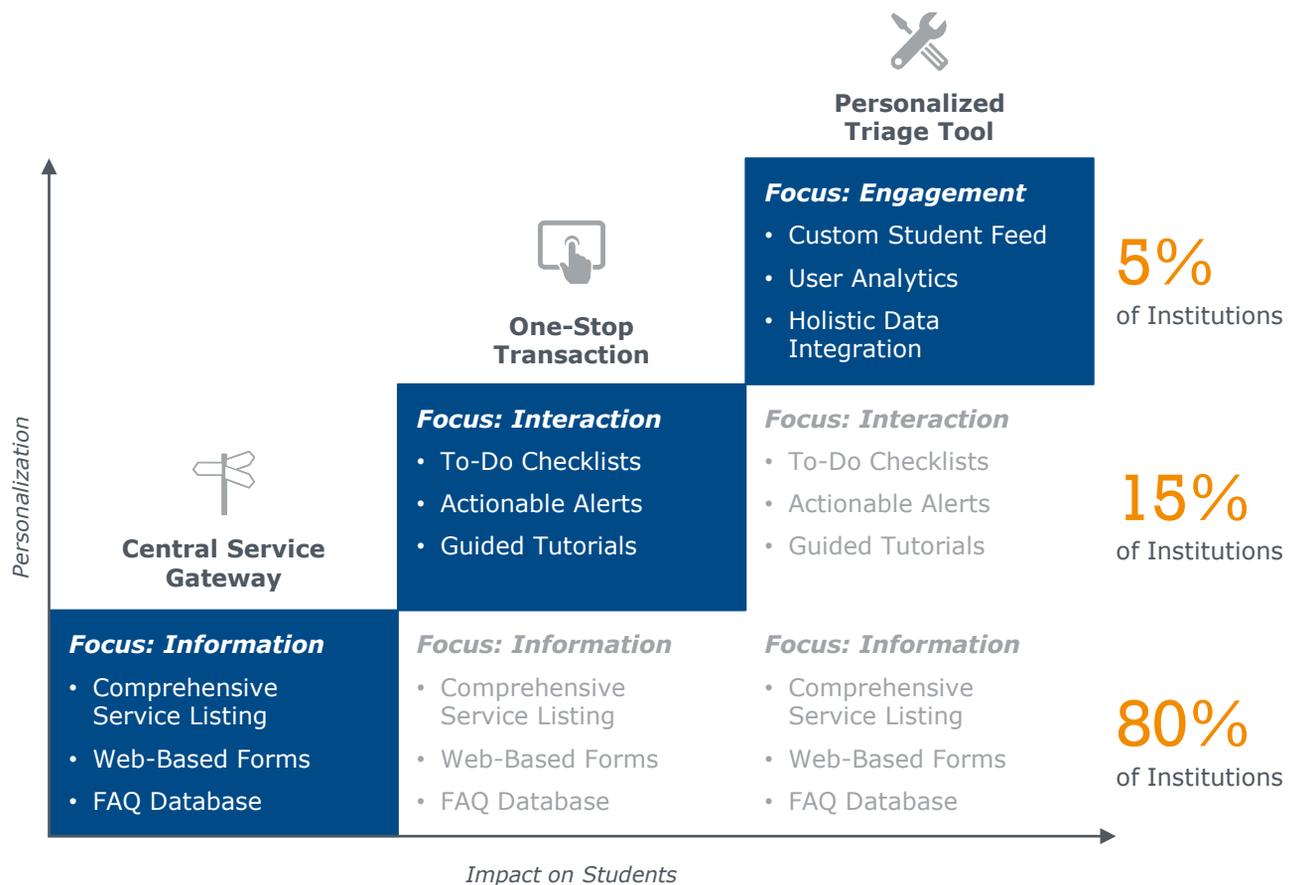
The practices and case studies in this volume illustrate innovative approaches to automating hundreds of interactions and transactions in way that not only eases advisor workloads, but also dramatically improves service quality through the use of analytics and responsive design. Migration from a siloed, staff-focused model to one built on self-advisement should not be interpreted as a mere cost-saving measure; rather, technology enables institutions to reach more students than ever before with greater precision than was previously possible.

Source: Robert B. Kvakik and Michael N. Handberg, "Transforming Student Services," *Educause Quarterly*, Number 2, 2000; EAB interviews and analysis.

Building the Optimal Self-Service Model

Moving Beyond Providing Information Resources to Enable Dynamic Interaction

Institutions on the forefront of service redesign find that the centralization and simplification of information is only the first step in streamlining student transactions with support units on campus. Most colleges and universities have at least begun investing in a central service gateway, including a one-stop listing of every relevant service, electronic forms to replace paper transactions, and a frequently asked questions repository to quickly address students' most common problems.



The second step in accelerating the resolution of student issues is to enable broader interaction with web-based services. A student should be able to start and finish most transactions within an institution's web portal. To do that, developers need to create customized alerts that include direct action links and guided tutorials for complex transactions (such as completing a lengthy financial aid application).

The frontier of self-service lies in moving beyond information and interaction to engagement. Research concerning student motivation and self-perception has encouraged some institutions to employ web outreach messaging during student orientations to help students reinforce the "grit" they will need to succeed in college. And through the application of data analytics, a small number of sophisticated institutions are leveraging mobile platforms to enable real-time communication with students, notifying them of critical resources mapped to their coursework and background, and allowing students to take immediate action through application-based transaction.

Source: EAB interviews and analysis.

Practice #1: One-Stop Service Portal

Central Portal Redesign Eliminates Confusion and Accelerates Transactions

Once students arrive on campus, successfully navigating through the maze of forms, deadlines, activities, and requirements associated with matriculation poses the largest initial challenge. Even registering for courses can leave students tired, confused, and frustrated. To lessen the burden associated with these transactions and eliminate the contribution of campus bureaucracy to student attrition, institutions are increasingly redesigning student services with simplicity in mind. An excellent example of one-stop web services from the University of Minnesota appears below:

The screenshot shows the University of Minnesota One-Stop Student Services portal. The header includes the university logo and the text "ONE STOP student services". The main content area is divided into several sections:

- Upcoming deadlines:** A list of dates and events, such as "Monday June 10: Summer financial aid disbursement begins for all undergraduate, graduate, and pharmacy students".
- "Just in time" news:** A section for "Direct Loan changes" with buttons for "Summer 2013 aid", "Apply for summer graduation", "Transcript fee increase", and "May/summer tuition rates".
- Fully electronic forms:** A "Quick Links" section with categories like "Forms online", "Registration tools", "Finance tools", and "Student records tools".
- Registration:** A section with a "Register online" button.
- Finances:** A section with links for "Costs, tuition, & fees", "Financial aid", "Your student account", "Pay the University", "Money management", "Educational tax benefits", and "Scams & fraud".
- Grades & transcripts:** A section with links for "Understanding grades", "Unofficial transcripts", "Official transcripts", "Certification letters", and "Student records privacy".
- Degree planning:** A section with links for "Explore degree options", "Advising & counseling", "Graduation Planner", "Graduate in four years", "Academic support & tutoring", "Changing college or major", "LE requirements", and "Graduation".
- U resources:** A section with links for "New to the U", "Campus life", "Computing & technology", "Employment & career", "Getting around campus", "U policies & administration", "Libraries", and "Bookstores".
- FAQ knowledge base:** A central section with a "Special for:" bar listing "New students", "Parents & guests", "Veterans", "Non-degree students", "Former students", and "Graduate students". Below it are icons for "LIVE LIKE A STUDENT", "Graduation Planner", "Ask One Stop", "Undergraduate Scholarship Search", and "ENGAGE".
- Mobile-friendly:** A "View mobile version" link at the bottom right.

Annotations in blue boxes highlight key features:

- "Comprehensive categories without 'scope creep'" points to the Registration, Finances, Grades & transcripts, Degree planning, and U resources sections.
- "All pages housed on One-Stop site; not just links to separate offices" points to the Quick Links section.
- "Mobile-friendly" points to the "View mobile version" link.

In addition to centralizing formerly separate support silos under one student services banner and within one physical location, the University of Minnesota developed a comprehensive, one-stop web portal to enable students to access and complete almost every possible administrative transaction on campus. The portal features the latest news and deadlines, a knowledge base addressing the most common student questions about everything from financial aid to health care, and perhaps most important, specific links on the page that each lead directly to a dedicated web resource within the portal. Too often, one-stop service portals merely link to information about services that require physical transactions, scheduled consultations, or phone interactions within office hours.

Enabling web-based interaction with support units has long been critical for online students (who are often unable to visit campus), but residential students also benefit from a model that reduces unnecessary logistical barriers. While every institution wants to ensure that their graduates demonstrate self-reliance and determination, there is no need for such qualities to be honed through frustrating interactions with university bureaucracy.

Practice #2: Financial Aid Tutorials

Using Scalable Tools to Guide Students Through Complex Transactions

The complexity of funding and payment in higher education causes distress even among students with little to no financial hardship. Too many students make critical errors in applying for federal or institutional aid, become frustrated along the way, or are unaware of the availability of various funding sources. Colleges and universities should take immediate action to maximize student awareness and utilization of financial resources, beginning with the creation of web-based, self-service tools that significantly reduce uncertainty and error with minimal one-on-one staff time.



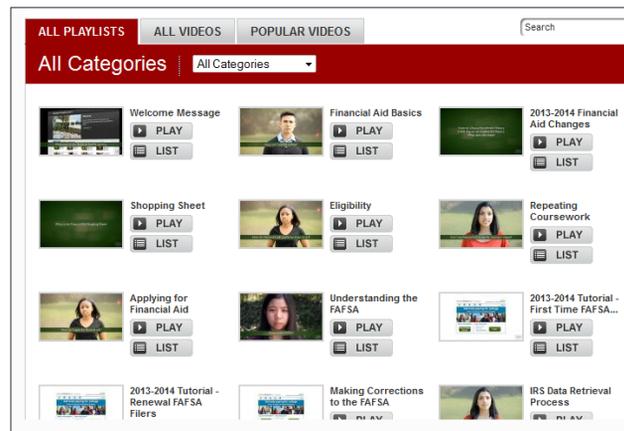
UC Santa Barbara's <1 Minute Video Guides



Top 5 Google Result for "FAFSA Steps"



Financial Aid TV's Customizable Library



47,000+ Views in First Year at Rutgers U.

The University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB) created a widely popular series of video guides based on the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) to help applicants and current students navigate each step of the process. UCSB's FAFSA guide has remained among the top five Google search results for "FAFSA steps" for several years, demonstrating its value not only to their own student population, but as a resource to other students and institutions as well. There is no need to reinvent tutorials addressing standardized topics such as federal or state-administered student aid; preexisting resources can and should be leveraged by others.

Several vendors have also emerged to help institutions address common financial aid questions. Financial Aid TV, for example, partners with institutional aid offices to host hundreds of premade instructional videos on institutional websites. Partner institutions are able to pick and choose individual videos or video categories to include and provide a comprehensive array of guidance without needing to invest in creating high-quality (and expensive) video tutorials themselves.

Source: "7 Easy Steps to the FAFSA," <http://www.finaid.ucsb.edu/FAFSASimplification/>; Financial Aid TV, www.financialaidtv.com; EAB interviews and analysis.

Practice #3: Personalized Status Alerts

Capturing and Leveraging Student Attention to Encourage Compliance

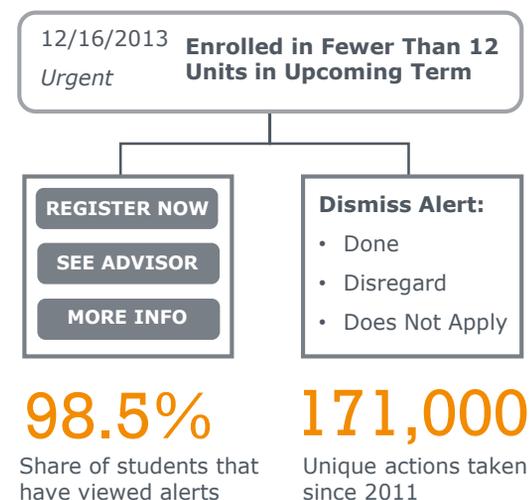
Even the best-designed student service portals serve only those students who seek them out. Further, their usefulness is limited by the extent to which users are able to locate the information pertinent to their particular situation, whether academic, financial, logistical, medical, or personal. Northern Arizona University has begun embedding alerts within their student information system, designed to prompt students logging into the portal with concise information relating to their enrollment status, academic standing, degree progress, or attendance history. These alerts ensure that every student is aware of any critical information relevant to their success and able to act on that information immediately.



Student Data Powers Three-Tier Alert System

	Urgent	Attention	Eligible
Enrollment	Zero Courses Next Term	Early Enrollment Advising	Honors Programs
Academic Standing	Probation / Mandatory Remediation	Review Impact of Low GPA	Scholarships Available
Degree Progress	Missing Requirement >60 credits	Missing Requirement <30 credits	Peer Tutor
Attendance	Missed Multiple Classes	Missed One Class	RA Position

Each Alert Enables and Requires Action



Student services staff began by building a database of every possible condition a student could encounter in their academic record and sorting those conditions into three categories: urgent (high risk of failure, requires immediate resolution), attention (helpful information students should be aware of), and eligible (a positive opportunity available to the student, such as a scholarship).

Staff then developed color-coded alerts for each condition that clearly contributes, positively or negatively, to student success at Northern Arizona. When a student meets a particular condition, an alert notification is prominently displayed in their portal homepage, each with clear links to web resources that can be used to address the issue and additional information that can provide further detail.

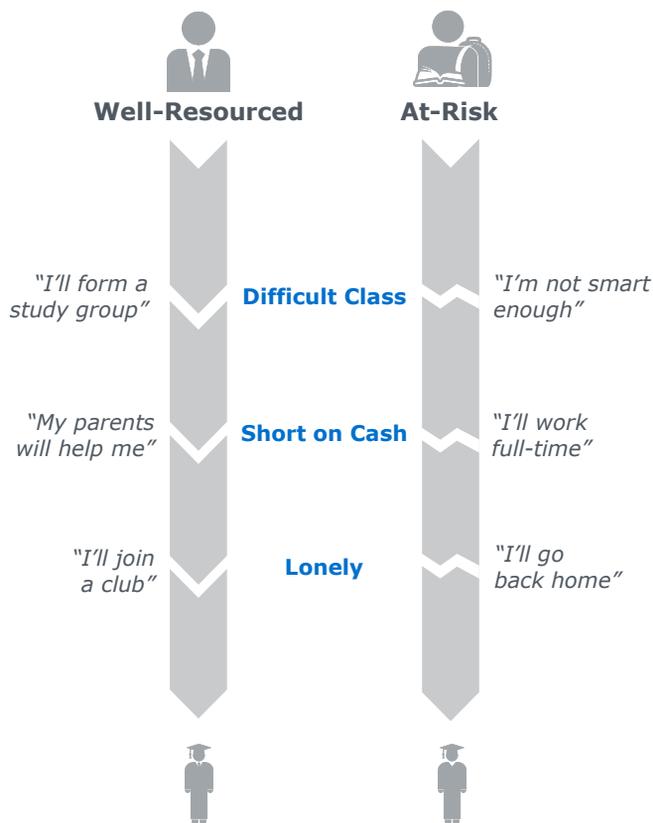
By ensuring that each alert concerns only matters impacting retention and completion, and requiring all alerts to include simple action steps, the myNAU Action Center has logged over 171,000 unique student interactions since 2011. Updates that previously required proactive student requests or lengthy advising interactions can now be accessed and addressed in a single click.

Source: "MyNAU Action Center: Description, Policies, Governance," August 2013; EAB interviews and analysis.

Addressing Problems Before They Surface

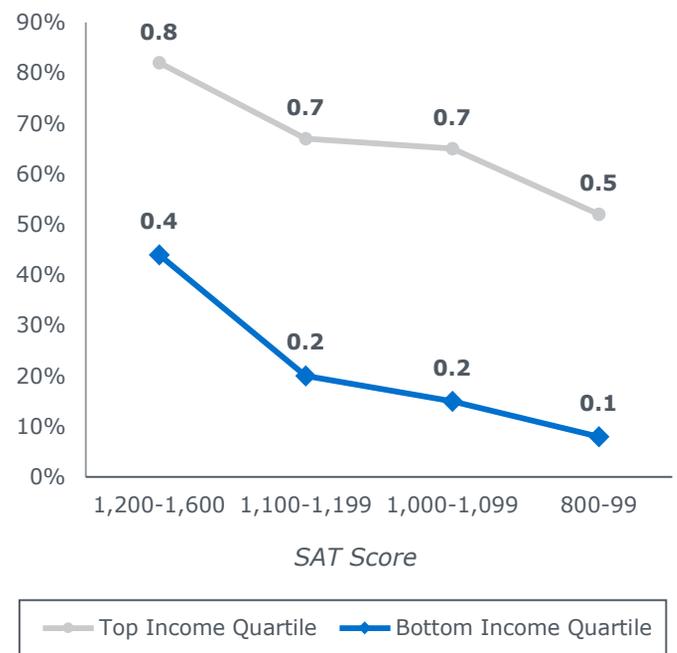
Disadvantaged Students Face Higher Climb in First Term

The gap in success rates between well-resourced students (those with plentiful financial resources, strong familial support, and large social networks) and high-risk populations of lower socioeconomic status is one of the most pervasive and difficult challenges in higher education. As higher-risk students make up a larger and larger share of enrollment across almost every college and university, student support staff are searching for ways to reach and assist these populations before mounting obstacles prove too much to overcome.



The Achievement Gap

Chance of Earning a Four-Year Degree by Age 24



This disparity in resilience often manifests in the first term on campus, as students with fewer resources may interpret initial growing pains as intractable shortcomings.

Faced with their first difficult class, a well-resourced student might form a study group, whereas an at-risk student may assume that they are not capable of college-level work.

When faced with financial difficulty, well-resourced students can often turn to their parents, whereas an at-risk student might take on a full-time job and shift to part-time enrollment.

Faced with social distress, well-resourced students can usually identify a relevant club or a network, while at-risk students are more likely to return home to rejoin their family and friends.

Source: *Rewarding Strivers: Helping Low-Income Students Succeed in College*, ed. Richard D. Kahlenberg, The Century Foundation Press, 2010; EAB interviews and analysis.

Practice #4: Preemptive Resilience Exercise

Building Confidence Among New Students to Mitigate Early Attrition

To address this gap in student confidence, the University of Texas at Austin allowed psychology faculty to construct a pre-orientation exercise designed to encourage resilience among high-risk students. Their hypothesis, motivated by research on the importance of self-improvement and belonging in personal success, was that introducing students to the concept of intellectual and social growth prior to their arrival on campus would increase their likelihood of completing their first set of courses.



The researchers created a controlled experiment within an online pre-orientation activity called "The UT Mindset"—some students would get a set of readings that emphasized both growth (the idea that your brain is a muscle that you can build and improve over time) and belonging (the idea that it is common and normal to feel out of place when acclimating to a new environment and that over time, everyone finds others to connect with). The control group read general passages about Austin's climate and culture. Then, students had to reflect on what they read by writing a personal message to another student struggling to acclimate to college, reinforcing and personalizing the key lessons in the readings.

In the control group, there was no clear impact measured by credit completion after the first term; and for low-risk students, neither intervention made much of an impact. But for high-risk students, the growth and belonging exercise had a significant impact: the gap between their credit completion rate and that of the low-risk population was cut in half, from 12% to 6%.

Convinced of the program's effectiveness, administrators began including this exercise in pre-orientation for all incoming students in fall 2014. The faculty behind the intervention argue that while it does not necessarily change students' beliefs immediately, it subtly improves their reactions to the first few challenges that come their way.

Case Study: Mobile Push Notifications

Lessons from the Frontier in Large-Scale, Analytics-Driven Advisement

The University of Kentucky has taken many of the lessons explored in this section and applied them at a scale and level of sophistication unrivaled in higher education by using their student-facing mobile application, MyUKMobile, as a tool to impact student success. While widespread replication of their approach to app-based advisement will prove difficult in the near term, exploring their progress as a case study can help to guide investment and service design for other institutions in the years ahead.

First, a look at how MyUKMobile's approach to student success has evolved since its inception:



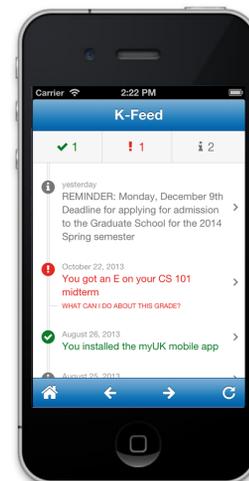
From a score...



...to a health indicator...



...to a personalized feed



When the university's Senior Vice Provost and Chief Information Officer, Vince Kellen, began spearheading the redesign of the institution's mobile application, he began with the "K-Score," a numerical representation of a student's likelihood to graduate, based on data feeding from academic records, historical performance, attendance, and involvement.

On its own, the K-Score was difficult to interpret, and hardly motivational for students. With the aim of influencing behavior (rather than merely displaying numerical data), app developers switched to a color-coded health indicator, hoping that students would seek to move from red to green, thereby improving their chance at graduation.

Given the time and effort necessary to move the dial significantly on so many contributing factors (GPA, credit accumulation, involvement in student organizations, and so on), the health indicator failed to sufficiently capture student interest as well. A radical redesign followed, de-emphasizing the slowly changing composite score, and prioritizing instead the individualized recommendations produced based on student information. The new "K-Feed" draws on the same data powering the K-Score to push personal notifications to the application and even to mobile home screens, linking critical information with tools and advice on how students should react.

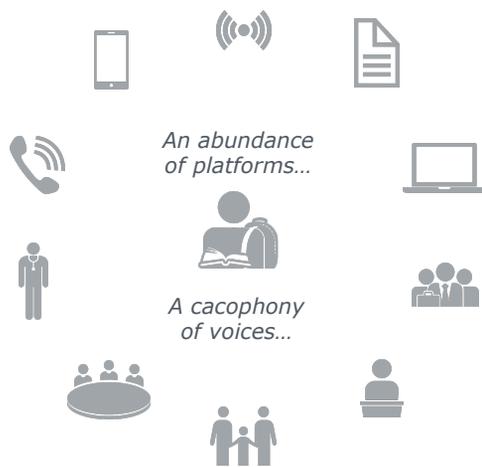
Source: EAB interviews and analysis.

Mobile Push Notifications (cont.)

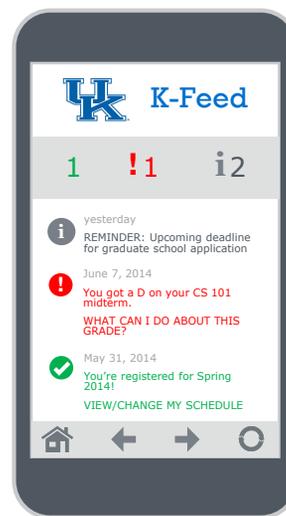
Optimizing the User Experience to Increase Utilization

Students receive hundreds of seemingly important messages from dozens of campus units throughout each term, in a wide variety of formats. Whether read on a poster in the student center or through the campus Twitter feed, these messages all vie for student attention. The K-Feed allows the University of Kentucky to supplant these general messages on many platforms with personal messages on the one platform constantly within arms reach—students' mobile phones.

Easy to Get Lost in Sea of Messages from Administration, Clubs, Friends, and Family



Analytics Behind K-Feed Enable Personalization and Ensure Relevance



Smart Curation

IT/Analytics group can tailor feed according to usage metrics

Micro-surveys

Institution and feed gain valuable data from targeted user input

Parent Opt-In (in development)

Students can allow parents to view feed to aid awareness

In addition to the color-coded urgency notifications described in Practice #3: Personalized Status Alerts, the K-Feed provides several new advantages. First, the information technology and analytics professionals at the university can manually curate and automatically sort (via algorithmic decision rules) the information displayed, to ensure that crucial messages are not buried beneath more superficial information about upcoming events or application deadlines.

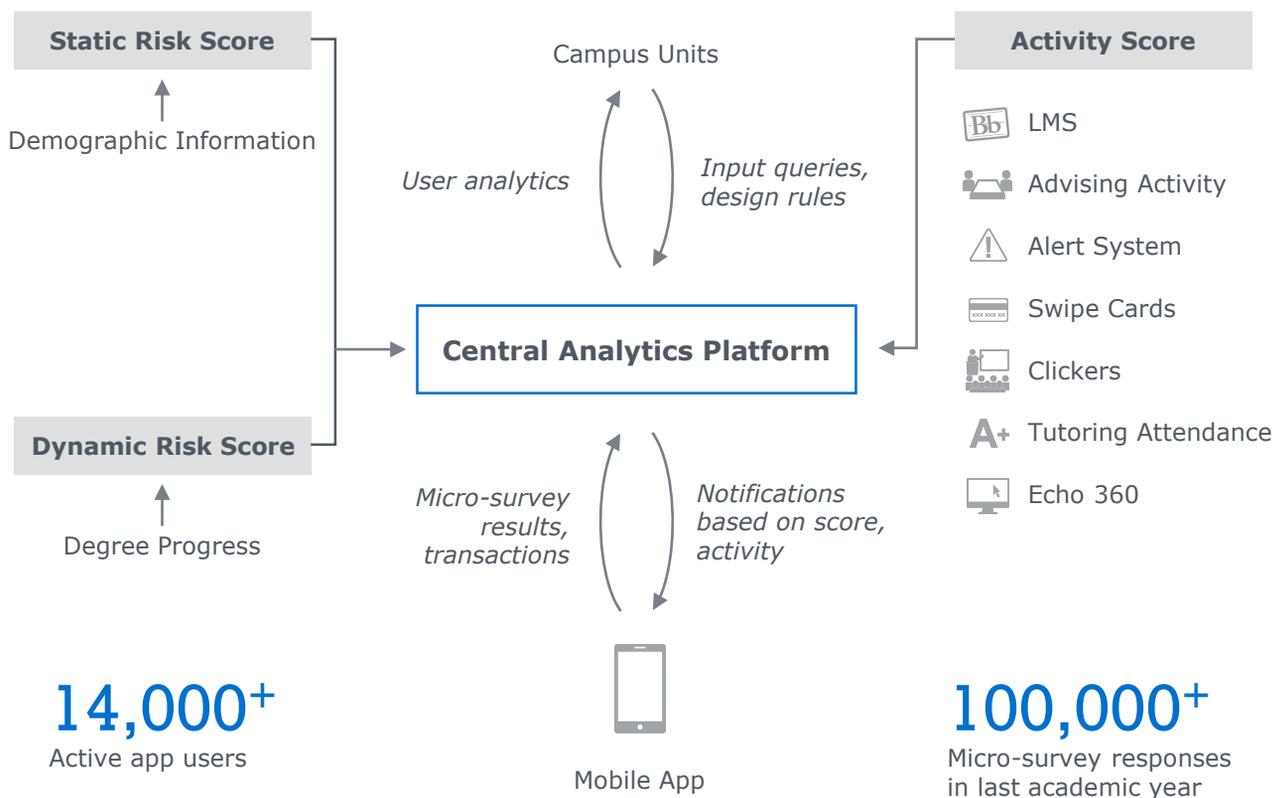
Second, the application is used to send micro-surveys to students, prompting them via a small pop-up window to answer a single question relevant to their success. After receiving a failing grade on a midterm exam, for example, a student might see the question, "Have you seen a tutor?" displayed the next time they log into MyUKMobile. Students answer these one-question micro-surveys at a much higher rate than lengthy, complex survey instruments. And because students are already logged into the app, there is no need for students to fill out demographic or academic information. The question itself can "nudge" the student to action by subtly reminding them of a resource they may not have thought to seek out. And finally, the institution gains valuable intelligence about student behavior, preferences, and compliance.

The third potential benefit to this approach is still in planning stages—the addition of parental access to the K-Feed granted through student permission. Knowing that for many parental awareness and involvement can help encourage at-risk students to persist, university leaders are hopeful that students will allow greater information sharing through the application than has previously been the case with transcripts and academic records.

Mobile Push Notifications (cont.)

Central Analytics Platform Enables Complex, High-Speed Interactions

What most differentiates the capabilities of the K-Feed from features in other mobile applications and student information systems is the breadth and complexity of the data behind it. On most campuses, merging information from student records, student information systems, learning management systems, early alert systems, swipe-card systems, and other databases is simply impossible.



The University of Kentucky’s investment in a high-speed, central analytics platform (at the cost of nearly \$500,000, plus additional hardware and maintenance expenses) enabled them to collect all of this information into one searchable data source, laying the groundwork for MyUKMobile to push more tailored, timely notifications.

Through the use of this platform, administrators can ask sophisticated questions about student outcomes (e.g., “How many Pell-eligible, first-generation sophomores received a C or lower on a midterm exam in a STEM course, but have never visited the tutoring center?”), and follow up with unique messages to that group (e.g., “Struggling in science class? Check out our STEM tutoring service”). In the future, the app will enable students to “check in” in various locations (such as the tutoring center) on campus through the use of GPS, Wi-Fi, SMS, or Bluetooth.

Key Takeaways

Leveraging Technology to Scale Basic Advisement

- 1. Students too often face a service bottleneck through both generalist and specialist staff for most kinds of support, information, and transactions on campus.** In this approach to assisting students with logistical issues, registration, financial aid, housing, health services, and other administrative concerns, the only way to improve service quality is to invest in additional staff, most of whom will be too busy with transactions to spend substantial time advising students in need.
- 2. Through the use of web and mobile technology, institutions can relieve much of the burden for basic advisement from support staff.** This alternative service model allows all simple transactions and information requests to be processed through automation and self-service, and devotes staff time to developing the necessary tools and consulting with students on higher-level concerns that are not effectively addressed at scale. The easier it is for students to navigate the fundamental structure of college, the more time both they and their advisors can spend on addressing curricular concerns, personal issues, and long-term aspirations.
- 3. Online support services should be integrated into a central student portal that enables paperless transactions.** One-stop service infrastructure (both physical and virtual) is widely accepted as an obvious improvement over the uncoordinated, confusing silos that comprise many campus student support offices. Still, few institutions have made the transition. Given students' expectations for efficient electronic interaction and the benefit simplified processes can have on students' ability to navigate through college, one-stop web portals have become an essential initial investment.
- 4. Provide students with detailed tutorials and answers to frequently asked questions regarding all complex transactions required by the institution.** The FAFSA, for example, is as difficult to complete unassisted as it is critical to students in need. Assistance with these processes need not require one-on-one consultation, however; the web resources developed by student service professionals on campus should include automated guides and comprehensive resources for transactions that are known to frustrate busy students.
- 5. Embed personalized status alerts within the primary student web portal to maximize student awareness of critical issues and encourage prompt response.** Even the best-designed student service portals serve only those students who seek them out. Critical information relating to student performance, degree progress, and personally relevant resources should be displayed prominently within the student information system and include a one-click action step to address the issue immediately.
- 6. Web-based orientation activities provide institutions with an early opportunity to improve the confidence and resilience of at-risk students.** Students from with fewer financial resources and social support are often more likely to leave college due to a perceived lack of aptitude and engagement. By targeting these students during orientation with messages that help them anticipate and overcome challenges, institutions can reduce the likelihood of early attrition.
- 7. Leverage the institution's official mobile application to enable real-time notifications and seamless interaction with campus units.** Handheld devices have quickly become the most powerful and reliable platform through which to communicate with students. While nearly every university has a mobile app to its name, only a tiny minority are exploring the app's potential to inform and influence student choices. As data analytics investment and mobile development expand over the next several years, student success leaders should leverage the mountains of data collected about student activity to deliver real-time, tailored messages to students at their point of need.



Preventing Delays in Degree Progress

How can we get more students on a path toward four-year graduation?

PART

2

Practice #5: Course Load Campaigns

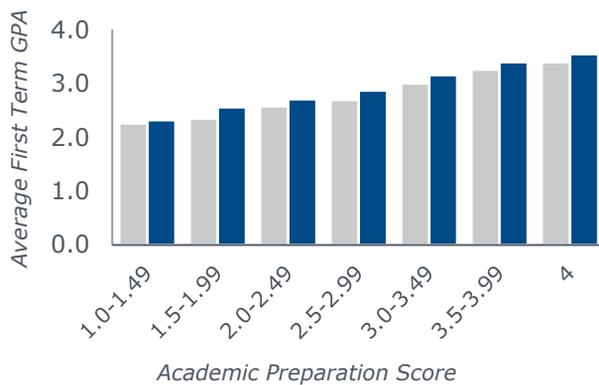
Maximizing On-Track Enrollment Among Full-Time Students

Unsurprisingly, students who take on larger course loads each term tend to graduate more quickly and more often than students who take fewer courses or enroll part-time. Institutional leaders commonly fear that demanding additional coursework from students with less aptitude or more constraining circumstances will only worsen their chances at success, however. But as one study from the University of Hawaii system illustrates, students taking 15 or more credits per term tend to perform better even when controlling for academic preparation and financial hardship.



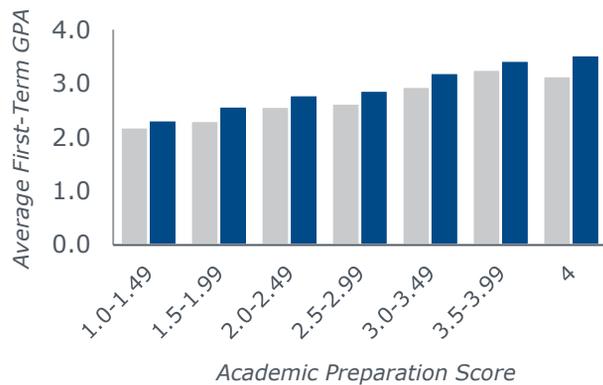
Better Results Across Spectrum of Academic Preparedness...

First-Time Freshmen at U of Hawaii, 2009-2011



...Even When Isolating Pell Recipients

First-Time Freshman Pell Grant Recipients at U of Hawaii, 2009-2011



If most students can be reliably expected to earn better grades (and complete more credits) when taking a full course load, administrators have a valuable tool at their disposal in the broader quest for stronger academic performance, better retention rates, and more completions. This insight suggests that every student able to accommodate 15 to 18 credits—typically considered “full” at most institutions, given the implicit assumption that students should be about to complete a 120-credit baccalaureate degree in four years—should be advised to do so.

As apparent as this may seem to many in higher education, most high school graduates do not matriculate with a full understanding of how lighter course loads disrupt their chances at graduating on time, and they simply opt for a schedule that fits short-term considerations or ramps them up slowly over time. Compounding the problem, academic advisors may be encouraging students with any degree of risk (a part-time job, low math or English proficiency, financial stress, and so on) to enroll in fewer courses per term to deal with additional pressure. As more and more data confirms the positive effect of full course loads not just on timely completion, but on GPA as well, it becomes increasingly critical that advisors set as many students as possible on a viable path toward four-year graduation.

Source: “Impact of Enrolling in 15 or More Credits on Selected Performance Outcomes,” Institutional Research and Analysis Office, University of Hawaii System, September 2013; EAB interviews and analysis.

Course Load Campaigns (cont.)

Policies, Incentives, and Outreach Efforts That Boost Credit Accumulation

While it is rarely advisable to require full course loads of all students regardless of status, there are many ways for institutions to boost credit accumulation among capable students who may opt for lighter schedules. The policy changes, redefinitions, incentives, and marketing campaigns described below are inexpensive to implement and relatively easy to replicate. Considering the benefits of timely degree progress to both students and institutions, adopting one or more of these ideas should be at the top of any student success agenda.

<p>Full-Time Status</p>  <p>Require 15 credits to consider student full-time, rather than 12 credits</p>	<p>Class Standing</p>  <p>Sophomore standing now defined as 30 credits, rather than 24 credits</p>
<p>Aid Incentives</p>  <p>State offers greater financial aid benefits for taking 15 credits rather than 12 credits</p>	<p>Credit Incentives</p>  <p>\$500 incentive scholarship for students completing 30 annual credits increased mean number of credits taken by 11%</p>
<p>Marketing Campaign</p>  <p>"4 Years 4 U" campaign promotes financial and academic benefits of taking full credit load</p>	<p>Withdrawal Deadlines</p>  <p>Course withdrawal deadline moved from week 14 to week 9 to discourage drops motivated by final grades</p>

Changing the institutional definition of "full-time" to 15 credits per term (rather than 12) and the definition of sophomore standing to 30 credits (rather than 24) are simple first steps to creating an expectation among staff and students that all are expected to stay on track for on-time graduation.

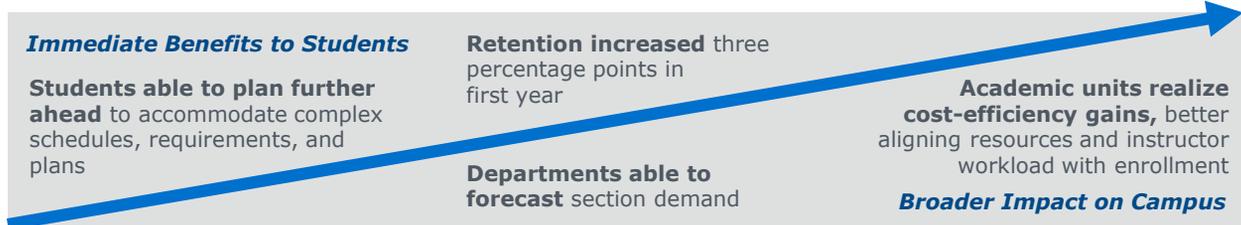
Some universities have employed financial incentives to reward greater credit accumulation, in addition to touting the tuition savings available to students who graduate in four years.

Relatively simple marketing campaigns featuring the financial and professional benefits of four-year graduation can yield impressive results as well. Georgia Regents University, for example, increased the share of first-time freshmen taking 15 or more credits or more from 8% in 2012 to 90% in fall 2014. Their "4 Years 4 U" campaign, with full support from centralized academic advisors, encourages students to create four-year degree plans and sign a pledge signaling their intention to stick to those plans.

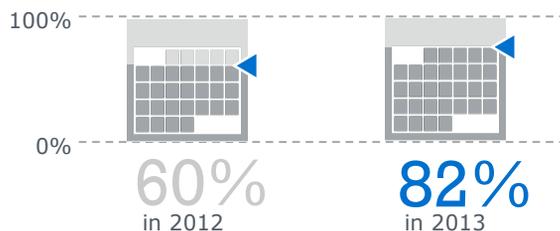
Practice #6: Multi-term Registration

Longer Time Horizon Encourages Persistence and Smarter Planning

Lighter course loads tend to correlate not only with delayed progress toward a degree, but with higher rates of attrition as well. When students see enrollment at a university as one of many competing demands on their time, rather than their primary occupation, they are far more likely to shift from part-time enrollment to a temporary or even permanent withdrawal from college. A small but growing number of institutions have begun to encourage students to commit not only to more courses per term, but to more terms per registration period. Cleveland State University’s students, for example, can now register for a year’s worth of courses—fall, spring, and summer terms—at one time.



Student Participation Is Voluntary, but High and Growing Quickly



“Technical Worries Unwarranted

I’m kind of surprised it’s not more widespread, because it’s not technologically a challenge. I think it makes a lot of sense if you can do it. It’s good resource planning.”

*Michael V. Reilly, Executive Director
American Association of College Registrars*

Allowing students to register for multiple terms in one transaction brings significant benefits to both students and their institution. Students are able to plan further ahead and anticipate course sequences, prerequisites, and other considerations. Perhaps more important is the subtle psychological effect of this longer commitment; having already signed on for a full year of courses, students considering withdrawal now must decide to cancel their registration, rather than merely choosing not to opt in for another term. Administrators at Cleveland State did not expect wide participation and retention gains from this new policy, but were surprised with both: over 82% of their students now register for more than one term at a time and fall-to-spring retention increased by three percentage points in the first year of implementation.

The institution, meanwhile, can better plan and coordinate scheduling in the near term (armed with not only historical enrollment data, but real-time registration information a year in advance), and in the long term, faculty and staff build schedules less around the inertial force of tradition and more around the curricular needs of students.

Helpfully, there are few, if any, technical impediments to enabling multi-term registration. Many registrars, in fact, express surprise that the practice is not more widespread. Academic leaders have either been simply unaware of the option or too busy with immediate strategic concerns to spend political capital on this seemingly minor change.

Source: Allie Grasgreen, “Registering Toward Completion,” *Inside Higher Ed*, April 11, 2014; “Cleveland State University—Multi-Term Registration: Course Scheduling for Student Success,” AASCU Innovations Exchange; EAB interviews and analysis.

Multi-term Registration (cont.)

Lessons from Early Adopters

Cleveland State’s experience with multi-term registration provides important implementation lessons with regard to two commonly asked questions about the practice: How can we encourage students to take advantage of the option to register for more than one term, and how do we accommodate changes that occur after a student’s initial registration (such as failing or dropping a prerequisite course when registered for the post-requisite the following term)?

Increasing Student Adoption



Default Registration Option

Show all available terms on main registration page to “nudge” students toward participation, and alter language to reinforce year-long planning



Targeted Email Outreach

Send monthly awareness emails throughout summer and fall to students who haven’t registered for additional terms

Improving Predictive Capacity



Post-requisite Audits

Audit prerequisite course progress at the add/drop deadline, withdrawal deadline, and end of term to reduce artificial post-requisite demand



Course Waitlists

Use waitlists to dynamically adjust section enrollment, justify additional sections, and forecast need for additional adjuncts

To maximize student participation, Cleveland State ensured that fall, spring, and summer terms are all clearly visible on a student’s primary registration webpage (rather than hoping they will find a separate link to additional terms at the end of the process), and advisors conduct targeted outreach over the summer to students who registered only for the fall term.

Changes in registration are resolved through three sequential post-requisite audits: student registration status is checked after the add/drop deadline, after the withdrawal deadline, and at the end of each term in order to substitute any student no longer eligible for their next scheduled course with the next student on that course’s waitlist. The substitute student then has 24 to 48 hours to accept a spot in that course before it is offered to the next student in line.

Taking multi-term registration to the next level: Even greater retention gains might be achieved by implementing this practice on a rolling basis, rather than only once per year. Students could be encouraged to complete registration for the following spring, summer, and fall terms at the end of fall, for example, helping to lessen attrition losses commonly suffered during the summer months. This model would require departments to create scheduling plans each term, as far as one year in advance.

Practice #7: Withdrawal Survey Module

Preventing Unnecessary Withdrawal Through Self-Service Advising Tools

There are good reasons to withdraw from a course—when genuinely overwhelmed by its difficulty, erroneously enrolled in the wrong section, or very likely to receive a failing grade, for example. But many students withdraw from courses or leave college entirely for reasons that might have been questioned and remedied in a simple advising conversation. Unfortunately, advisors are often entirely uninvolved in the withdrawal process, poorly trained on how to deal with withdrawal requests, or unable to accommodate the flood of inquiries that tends to surface toward each term’s withdrawal deadline. Without good advice, avoidable withdrawals can easily lead to severe delays on degree progress.

Students have many reasons for choosing to withdraw from a course or the institution

Some are “good” reasons

“I’m avoiding a failing grade”

“I’m overwhelmed and worried about my grades in other courses”

Many are “bad” reasons

“I’m not earning the grade I want”

“I dislike the instructor”

“I don’t want to get up this early”

“I’ve lost interest in the material”

Suboptimal advising practices let too many students make “bad” choices

Structure

Few institutions require an advising meeting prior to withdrawing

Quality

Some advisors simply rubber stamp all withdraw requests

Capacity

Even the best advisors cannot always dedicate adequate time to assessing all requests

Absent a meaningful conversation, **many students do not understand the long-term implications** of their withdrawal decisions

Understandably, registrars hesitate to add an additional layer of paperwork to students’ already daunting to-do list, particularly for those who are struggling academically. The path of least resistance, then, is to allow students to withdraw from either individual courses or from the university altogether in a simple electronic transaction.

The simplicity of that transaction raises difficult questions about unnecessary withdrawals. How will the institution identify students who would be better served by remaining enrolled and assist them without requiring a full advising appointment?

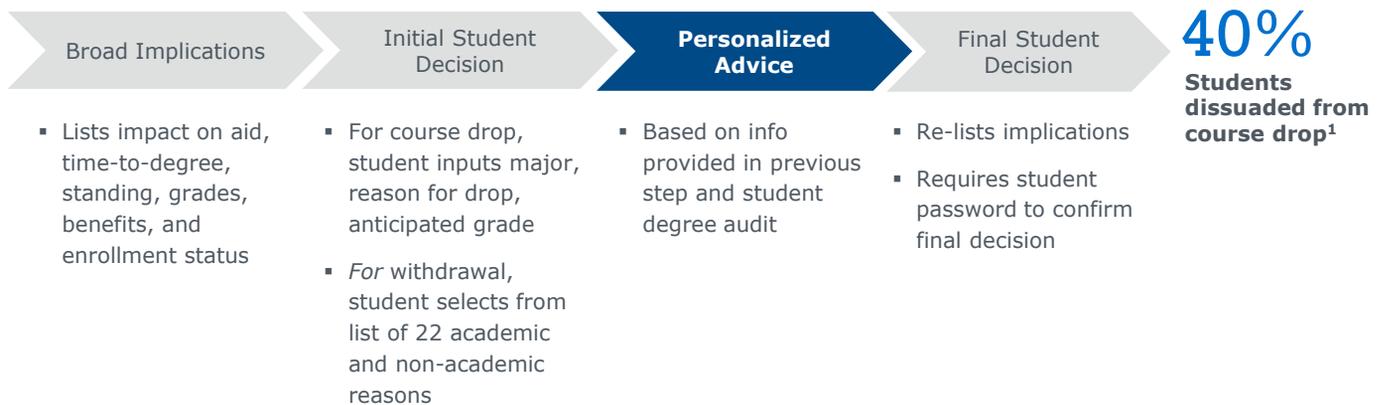
Withdrawal Survey Module (cont.)

Survey Data Enables Customized Guidance and Valuable Insight for Institution

Penn State University’s solution was to build a web-based withdrawal survey module to replace what had initially been a one-click transaction. The module, based in the student information system, walks every student requesting a withdrawal through an automated series of prompts that surface relevant guidance and resources without draining scarce advisor time.



Each Stage of Module Provides New Information and Opportunity to Back Out



After initially expressing interest in withdrawal, students are shown a list of broad implications they might face—lost financial aid, delays in degree progress, changes to academic standing, and so on. If they choose to move forward with withdrawal, they must then choose among a comprehensive list of reasons, each prompting pre-determined feedback and links to relevant contacts on campus that might address their given concerns. Finally, if students persist, the module lists each potential implication of withdrawal once more and requires the student to re-enter their password to finalize the decision.

Penn State reports that nearly 40% of those who begin the module do not finish, illustrating the significant change in outcomes from an immediate transaction. In the future, advisors might explore data from module interactions to study which kinds of students and which listed reasons contribute most to withdrawal requests.

1) Estimate based on 2012 data.

Source: EAB interviews and analysis.

Key Takeaways

Preventing Delays in Degree Progress

- 1. Most institutions have made considerable investments in supporting first-year freshmen, but timely graduation remains a significant challenge to even well-prepared students.** As it becomes more difficult to address the need for new revenues by enrolling additional new students and more apparent that upper-division students constitute a surprisingly large share of non-completers, campus leaders must devote greater attention to supporting students through the entirety of their academic careers.
- 2. Suboptimal registration and withdrawal policies are partly to blame for poor four-year completion rates.** Some students fail or leave for unavoidable reasons, but many others might have been retained with academic rules that encourage greater commitment to degree progress.
- 3. Evidence increasingly suggests that even at-risk students perform better when enrolled in 15 or more credit hours per term.** It is obvious that larger course loads lead to faster graduation, but many are surprised to learn that the primary argument against broader deployment of course load requirements or incentives—that part-time students facing greater academic or financial challenges would struggle with additional courses—has been called into question by several institutional analyses.
- 4. Institutions should encourage all students able to accommodate full-time enrollment to attempt enough credits each term to graduate on time.** While most institutions cannot (and should not) require every student to take a full course load, every institution should ensure that students are advised to enroll in as many courses as they can to prevent delays in graduation or loss of financial aid.
- 5. Allow students to register for a full year of courses in advance.** Allowing students to register for several terms at a time strengthens their commitment to the university, helps them to plan farther ahead, and encourages the institution to accommodate the long-term interests of its students.
- 6. Prevent unnecessary withdrawals by incorporating cautionary advice and relevant resources into the withdrawal process.** Consequential decisions like dropping a course or withdrawing from the university should not be enabled through simple registrar transactions; structure withdrawal processes in a way that informs students of potential negative consequences and allows them multiple opportunities to reconsider.



Reducing the Costs of Deviation

How can we help off-path students persist and graduate without sacrificing rigor?

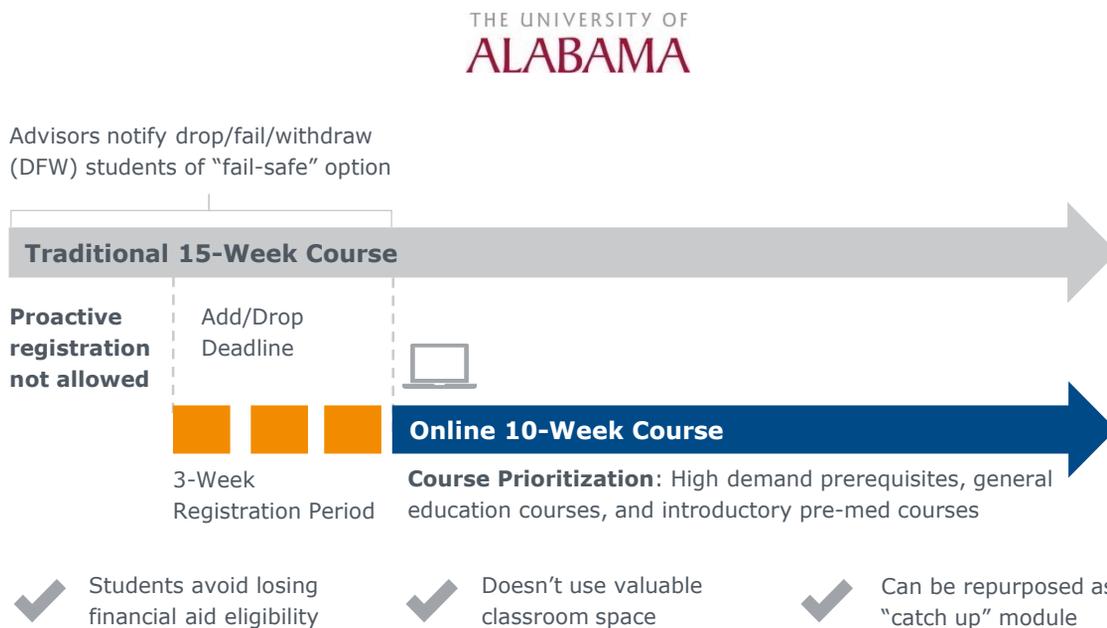
PART

3

Practice #8: Withdrawal Redirect Courses

Turning Course Withdrawals into Credit Hours to Keep Students on Path

When students withdraw from one or more courses, they risk a change to their enrollment status that could endanger their financial aid eligibility, make it difficult to catch up in new classes, and put them on a longer path to graduation. Several departments at the University of Alabama have addressed these challenges by creating accelerated, online course options for students who drop or withdraw within the first 5 weeks of a 15-week term. Designated as Fall II and Spring II, these shorter sessions are not visible to students during initial registration to prevent them from proactively opting in to the abbreviated online format intended for the students in need of a flexible alternative.



During the first five weeks of each term, advisors monitor registration records to identify and contact students who might benefit from these offerings, which are typically high-enrollment, lower-division courses. Fall II and Spring II registration is advertised with posters and brochures around campus and in advisor offices to ensure student awareness.

While it can be difficult to match instructor supply with last-minute student demand each term, department chairs have been relatively successful at predicting the most likely withdrawal candidates and appropriate online alternatives, drawing on a supply of available faculty able to teach high-enrollment courses. Some faculty inevitably fall short of their intended course load each term (due to under-enrollment or scheduling changes) as well, and are eligible for reassignment to withdrawal redirect courses.

As student performance analytics improve, both faculty and advising professionals will have more tools at their disposal (LMS triggers, early alerts, risk scoring) to provide the optimal mix of withdrawal redirect options for students in shorter and shorter time windows. Student notification might be automated and linked to a web-based withdrawal module similar to Practice #7: Withdrawal Survey Module, to enable students to seamlessly shift from course withdrawal to registering for an applicable accelerated offering.

Practice #9: Pre-professional Macro Majors

A Viable Alternative for Students Pursuing Limited-Capacity Programs

Nearly every campus has one or more academic programs that have more applicants than their capacity or selectivity can accommodate. Nursing is the most well-known example of these so-called “impacted” majors, though many arts and performance fields fall into this pattern as well. Students who matriculate with the intention of entering these programs often struggle to recover when denied admission, leading them to transfer to an institution that might afford them a second chance, or to another field less aligned with their interests and prior course work. The University of Missouri developed a health science major to address growing pre-nursing enrollment, which has met with great success.



Bachelor of Health Science Requirements

New courses

- Public Health Principles and Practices
- Health Care in the United States

Overlapping requirements

- Microbiology
- Human Anatomy
- Human Development

No longer applicable

- Nursing as a Profession
- Psychosocial Issues in Nursing

Not Missing a Beat

A pre-nursing student who switches to the Bachelor of Health Science program at the end of year two will have already completed **21 credits toward the new major** plus several general education courses

Surprisingly High-Demand for BHS Program

250

Anticipated Enrollment
(launched in 2006)



1,182

Actual Enrollment
(as of spring 2014)

The most important feature of this new program was the assurance of overlapping major requirements, to provide students with a strict pre-nursing credit portfolio with the ability to switch seamlessly into the new program without falling behind on their path to graduation or having to unnecessarily repeat courses. Even when moving between STEM majors, students are frequently forced to take department-specific versions of statistical methods, calculus, or anatomy. By building this program specifically with major-switching in mind, faculty were able to assuage any curricular fears students might have when considering options outside of nursing.

Administrators were pleased to encounter unanticipated student demand for the major, as it grew from a few hundred enrollees in 2006 to nearly 1,200 students as of spring 2014. Now among the university’s fastest growing majors, the health science program has become much more than a second-choice alternative for pre-nursing students. Given the need for capable health care professionals in the ever-evolving medical sector, students with general interest in the health industry now actively pursue this option to prepare for graduate programs in public health and careers in health care management, pharmaceuticals, and therapy.

Source: EAB interviews and analysis.

Pre-professional Macro Majors (cont.)

Overcoming the “Plan B” Stigma

Securing faculty interest, administrative approval, and student interest in macro majors designed to augment a more narrow discipline requires diligent planning and careful messaging. If the program is perceived as lacking in rigor or viable pathways to graduate programs or careers, it will be severely hamstrung from the beginning.

Academic Rigor and Respect

1 Perceived Prestige and Rigor

Missouri’s BHS is built around a course of study that students view as legitimate and worthy

2 Top-Notch Faculty

Recruit talented instructors to dispel student fears of settling for a second-class education

3 Expanded Horizons

Introduce students to new ideas and outside of the narrow focus of their original major

Clear Connection to Careers

4 Industry Endorsement

Consult employers to develop a curriculum that best prepares graduates for industry needs

5 Robust Career Services

Build confidence in postgraduate employment through internships and placement programs

6 Potential for Future Study

Curriculum prepares students to continue their studies in an accelerated nursing program

Program leaders cited the following keys to demonstrating both the legitimacy and professional returns associated with the new program: first, building the curriculum on strong foundations linked to top faculty and emphasizing the value of pursuing coursework outside of a narrowly focused discipline. And second, securing the support and endorsement of industry organizations and prospective employers, who were consulted in the creation of the program as well.

Students whose paths take them away from their original plans—whether in the performing arts, applied sciences, or other limited-capacity fields—need to be reminded of both the breadth of careers within their range of interest, and the extent to which skills, professional roles, and sub-fields are likely to shift during their career. The foundation provided by pre-professional macro majors provides not only a chance at graduation for students who otherwise might have withdrawn from attendance, but also a promising pathway to success that aligns with their passions.

Practice #10: Multidisciplinary Completion Program

Encouraging Timely Graduation Through Breadth-Focused Major

While the previous practice (*Pre-professional Macro Majors*) helps reroute students set on an overly narrow path, it is equally important to address the obstacles faced by students with an overly broad accumulation of credits. Students who have earned nearly enough credits to graduate but lack many of the upper-division requirements in their particular major often find themselves stuck between an unanticipated additional year of enrollment (and its accompanying expenses) or simply withdrawing from attendance. The University of Texas at San Antonio developed a multidisciplinary studies program to provide these students with a more flexible, attractive option.

Alternative Degree Path Emphasizes Breadth and Protects Rigor

UTSA Student Transcript		
General Education 42 units		
Major Requirements 48 units		
Biology	History	English
1. Bio 100	1. His 100	1. Eng 100
2. Bio 200	2. His 200	2. Eng 200
3. Bio 395	3. His 395	3. Eng 395
4. Missing	4. Missing	4. Missing
5. Missing	5. Missing	5. Missing
Capstone Project "Intersection of Three Fields..."		

Students meet same core degree requirements

Requires three disciplinary specializations, but only 15-18 credits in each

Final project requires synthesis of subject areas

Helps Several Unique Student Populations Meet Their Goals

Military Students

Bring prior learning and work experience, but often lack curricular focus

Transfer Students

Bring credits from multiple institutions, but many don't count toward major

Major Switchers

Credits span several programs but unlikely to finish requirements for each

Honors Students

Often want to mix and match curricula from a variety of disciplines

UTSA's multidisciplinary studies program requires students to complete the same core curricular requirements as students in more traditional majors; its distinctiveness lies in its upper-division expectations. It requires students to designate three unique disciplines as concentrations and earn at least 15 credits in each, 9 of which must be in the upper division. One concentration serves as the "primary focus area," and must include 18 credits, 12 of which must come from the upper division. Finally, students must complete a final capstone project that demonstrates synthesis of their concentration choices. This intentional design ensures that the program is not viewed by either faculty or students as less rigorous or prestigious route to a degree; rather, it is an equally demanding path that emphasizes the integration of multiple disciplines, rather than specialization in only one.

The program has allowed hundreds of UTSA undergraduates to complete their degrees on time, without taking on additional debt or delaying employment. It has been particularly helpful to military and transfer students, who often bring credits from a variety of sources but fear that graduation might be more trouble than re-enrollment is worth. Late major-switchers can also benefit from an alternative that significantly reduces the additional courses needed to graduate. UTSA's best and brightest students began to flock to multidisciplinary studies as first-year students, to the surprise of many faculty. These students desired an option that allowed them to customize their own degree, acknowledging that for today's graduates, broad competence across several disciplines can be just as critical in the job market as narrow expertise in one field.

Source: Christi Fish, "New Multidisciplinary Studies Degree Made for Students with Varied Interests," UTSA Today, June 14, 2012; EAB interviews and analysis.

Key Takeaways

Reducing the Costs of Deviation

- 1. Students who deviate from their intended plan often pay an unnecessarily high price for failure.** No amount of investment and planning will prevent every misstep, but students should not face a choice between error-proof planning and attrition. Institutions should establish curricular “safety net” policies to address common difficulties that are known to lead to withdrawal and non-completion.
- 2. Create accelerated, late-start course options to provide students who withdraw from a course early in a term to maintain progress to degree.** By building and advertising accelerated course modules, institutions can encourage students who might otherwise have delayed their progress or lost financial aid eligibility to maintain a full course load.
- 3. Develop alternative pre-professional majors for students who are unable to gain admission or no longer interested in a limited-capacity program.** Students denied entry to so called “impacted” majors such as nursing or performing arts often simply transfer to another institution or meander through electives with no clear backup plan. Broader major pathways designed to keep these students within their field of interest and prepare them for alternative careers have proven to be both beneficial to retention and attractive to first-year students interested in a wider set of potential post-graduation options.
- 4. Offer a multidisciplinary degree program that emphasizes curricular breadth to provide a viable path to graduation for students struggling to meet strict major requirements.** More flexible degree requirements can help transfer and military students, adult degree completers, late major switchers, and even honors students (who often want to double- or triple-major within a four-year time frame) complete their degrees on time.

Diagnostic Assessment

Evaluating Institutional Readiness and Prioritizing Practices for Adoption

The following diagnostic is designed to help members identify weaknesses or gaps in service on campus and match them with the most appropriate practices included in this report.

Leveraging Technology to Scale Basic Advisement

On our campus...	Relevant Practice
...Many basic service transactions require paper forms and office visits	One-Stop Service Portal (p. 20)
...Mistakes on financial aid applications lead to unnecessary hardship	Financial Aid Tutorials (p. 21)
...Critical messages to students are lost or ignored	Personalized Status Alerts (p. 22)
...First-generation students often struggle in their first term	Preemptive Resilience Exercise (p. 24)
...Personalized advisement only occurs in one-on-one consultations	Case Study: Mobile Push Notifications (p. 25)

Preventing Delays in Degree Progress

On our campus...	Relevant Practice
...Students often take lighter course loads than they are able to accommodate	Credit Load Incentives (p. 31)
...Students are only able to register for one term at a time	Multi-term Registration (p. 32)
...Students can easily withdraw from courses without advice from advisors	Withdrawal Survey Module (p. 34)

Reducing the Costs of Deviation

On our campus...	Relevant Practice
...Students who withdraw early in terms often fail to replace the credits	Withdrawal Redirect Courses (p.38)
...Students denied entry into limited-capacity majors often transfer or fail	Pre-professional Macro Majors (p. 39)
...Students with more than 120 credits often fail to graduate	Multidisciplinary Completion Program (p. 41)



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