



Northwest Arkansas Community College: Increasing Attendance and Retention with Starfish



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- Curtis Harrell, Success Planner Administrator and Professor of English

Northwest Arkansas Community College, Bentonville, Arkansas

Northwest Arkansas Community College (NWACC) is a public, two-year college which serves over 8,300 students in college credit courses, and an additional 7,000 students in non-credit courses. Many students transfer to the University of Arkansas, the flagship university for the state. 100% of NWACC's students are commuters, and many are low-income.

Maintaining Enrollment in the Face of Economic Challenges

As with many community colleges, enrollment at NWACC has seen its ups and downs. "In the first part of this century, our local economy grew in leaps and bounds and we were almost growing too quickly," said Curtis Harrell, Success Planner Administrator and Professor of English at NWACC. "In fact, we saw double digit growth every year until 2011." But like most community colleges, an economic upturn coincided with an enrollment decline.

Faced with a declining enrollment and many at-risk students, including 50% of all freshmen students needing remedial coursework in math, NWACC needed a way to closely track students in an effort to increase retention and student success. Since implementation in 2011, Starfish has been a key element in NWACC's student retention efforts.

"Starfish makes it easy for students to create and manage contact with their own success network that includes instructors, advisors, and other campus resources," said Harrell. "It also provides tracking methods that make keeping up with the student's tailored success plan easy and sustainable."



Since implementing Starfish:

- 9% retention rate increase
- 4% graduation rate increase
- 3% decrease in absences
- 54% of at-risk students reached through flags
- 35% of at-risk students reached via appointments
- 5% increase in faculty participation in progress surveys

Lowering Absenteeism and Recouping Financial Aid

"One of the easiest ways to improve student retention is by ensuring all faculty track class attendance," said Harrell. NWACC made taking attendance in Starfish mandatory in 2015 in order to use attendance as the spearhead for faculty buy-in. "When you take attendance in Starfish, you're collecting data that helps to retain students not just in your class, but across the entire college."

Since instituting mandatory attendance reporting, NWACC has seen a 3% decrease in student absences, which is positively impacting the college's bottom line. NWACC continues to have an administrative drop deadline on the 11th day of the semester to align with federal loan regulations. "But now," Harrell explained, "if a student has not attended any classes in those first eleven days, we drop that student from the course and can recoup those financial aid dollars." Since implementing Starfish,

NWACC's student success initiatives have resulted in a 9% increase in retention rates for full-time students and a 4% increase in graduation rates.

Faculty participation in progress surveys has continually grown over time from 54% participation in 2015-16 to 59% in 2017-18. Software deployment has grown as faculty involvement has grown. "I'm easily able to provide a rationale for why faculty should use Starfish," Harrell added. "It's so intuitive, once you get buy-in from users to take attendance in the system, they get curious about flags and the other functionalities." Today, NWACC is reaching 54% of their at-risk students through flags and another 35% via appointments.

"After Starfish became established, our faculty realized that taking attendance in the system is only one small part of a greater and more open dialogue between campus stakeholders who can help students be successful," Harrell concluded. "Starfish is fulfilling everything we need it to do."