



Penn State: Establishing Support Networks with Upgraded Student Success Software



PennState

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- David R. Smith, Associate Dean for Advising and Executive Director of the Division of Undergraduate Studies

Pennsylvania State University, Centre County, Pennsylvania

The Pennsylvania State University (Penn State) consistently ranks among the top one percent of the world's universities. With 24 campuses, 100,000 students, and 17,000 faculty and staff, the sheer scale of the university is striking. 275 baccalaureate degree programs are offered to some 80,000 undergraduate students. As a core principle, Penn State allows and encourages student movement, both from campus to campus and from major to major.

A Sprawling Institution with Outdated Software

To better support students across the Commonwealth, Penn State has made substantial investments in a range of new technologies. After outgrowing previous systems, Penn State implemented Starfish in 2016 to fill the need for advising appointment scheduling and documentation, as well as for early progress reporting by instructors. "This presented the university a chance to consolidate advising records into a single system, helping us better support students as they move from one unit to another within Penn State," said Dr. Janet Schulenberg, Associate Director, Division of Undergraduate Studies. "Our provost was very adamant that we move to a single system for advising notes and progress reports, and that every unit would be expected to use it."

An Ambitious Schedule

To ensure faculty buy-in was achieved from the start, faculty and advisors from across the university who had actively used the previous systems were asked to join the Starfish implementation team. "This team guided our configuration and rollout and helped to share information about the strengths of Starfish with their units" said David R. Smith, Associate Dean for Advising and Executive Director of the Division of Undergraduate Studies.



65,000

students each semester receive a flag or kudo through Starfish

80,000

advising appointments made through Starfish in the Fall 2017 semester

80,000

undergraduates eligible for progress reporting

“With Starfish’s progress reporting, calendaring, and notes all packaged together, we are better positioned to connect students with instructors and staff across Penn State that work together to help students reach their respective academic goals,” said Smith. “The fact that Starfish was so user-friendly and intuitive made our initial implementation that much better.”

Implementation of Starfish began in earnest in January 2016. A strict deadline was put in place for August of that year, when the legacy system would be deactivated. In May 2016, an initial Starfish release established advising rosters, a single notes system for the university, and academic summary functions for use during New Student Orientation. “That gave enough people at each campus familiarity with the software to ease the way for a more seamless rollout in the fall,” Smith explained. “We also visited numerous campuses to meet with advisers for hands-on training sessions.”

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Painting by Numbers

Using Starfish, Penn State set out to establish a single, collaborative platform that fosters student success. In the two years since implementation, Smith feels that the university has achieved significant outcomes supporting that goal, including:

- Around 65,000 students receive a flag or kudo through Starfish each semester.
- 80,000 advising appointments were made through Starfish in Fall 2017 – most made by students.
- Eligibility for progress reporting increased from 16,000 first-year students to all 80,000 undergraduates through the use of Starfish.

Smith believes the payoffs have far exceeded Penn State’s initial goals. “With our immediate needs driving the decision, we had a limited view of everything Starfish could actually do. Once we began our implementation, we uncovered its broader potential to build networks to better support our students.”