

Quest for Student Success

INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

In 2010, the Complete College Tennessee Act changed the way state funds were allocated to Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU) to emphasize student outcomes rather than yearly student enrollment numbers. Despite having implemented several programs to support students, MTSU's six-year graduation rate had long hovered around 50 percent, while its first-to-second year retention rate seemed stuck at around 70 percent. With a change in the state funding model, it was necessary to show steady, significant improvements in both retention and graduation rates.

The *Quest for Student Success* was created in 2013 as MTSU's strategic guide to improve the number of students who stay enrolled and complete their degrees. The plan established three goals: 1) to recruit students who value success and have the potential to succeed in a student-centered culture; 2) to ensure that every student is provided with a positive, student-centered, and engaged learning experience through which best teaching and learning practices are employed; and 3) to boost student success through innovation and data-informed practices.

MTSU established the Office of Student Success and a new senior leadership position to lead this campus-wide initiative. Campus leadership believed that significant and rapid progress would be best accomplished with an intentional, strategic, "one university" model that, although coordinated centrally, empowered all units across the MTSU campus. Given the importance of student success across campus,

the university needed to identify a reasonable number of core initiatives on which to focus its energies.

USING DATA TO IMPROVE STUDENT OUTCOMES

In 2014, MTSU hired 47 additional advisors and joined the Education Advisory Board's Student Success Collaborative (SSC). The SSC predictive analytics software provides advisors with instant, accessible, individual-level information on any student assigned to them. Information available to the advisors includes the student's academic performance history, whether they have completed key courses in the major, if they have obtained the recommended minimum threshold grades in key courses, if the student has had contact with any advisor on campus, and if the student is at-risk of not being able to successfully complete their current major. This information helps advisors identify students who are off track, communicate with them through the advising software platform, propose interventions and solutions before it is too late, and monitor student responses and progress.

Implementation of the new advising platform also provided 150 key institutional, faculty, and staff leaders from across campus with ready access to important student success measures. While annual first-year retention figures are not provided in a timely enough manner that would permit regular monitoring and strategy adjustment, persistence from first to second semester is one of the strongest predictors of retention. In 2014, MTSU created a persistence-tracking dashboard for each college and department (see Table 1)



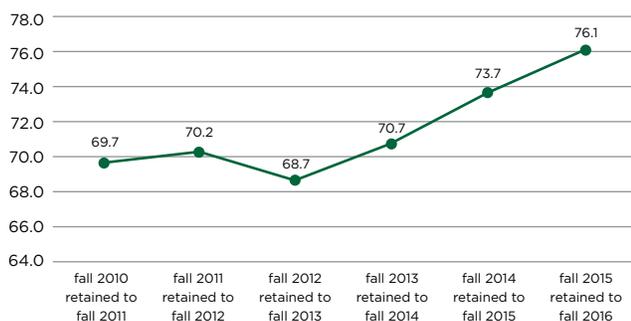
to track the persistence of first-year, new transfer, and second-year students, which is tracked on a weekly basis.

RESULTS

Within just a few months of hiring additional advisors and launching the predictive analytics advising platform, the percentage of MTSU students enrolled in fall 2014 who re-enrolled for the spring 2015 semester increased 2.5 percentage points for new first-year students, 4.1 percentage points for new transfer students, and 2.0 points for second-year students. Moreover, persistence rates for undergraduate students increased in each college to the highest levels in at least six years. MTSU estimated that the institution retained an additional 400 students for this single semester alone.

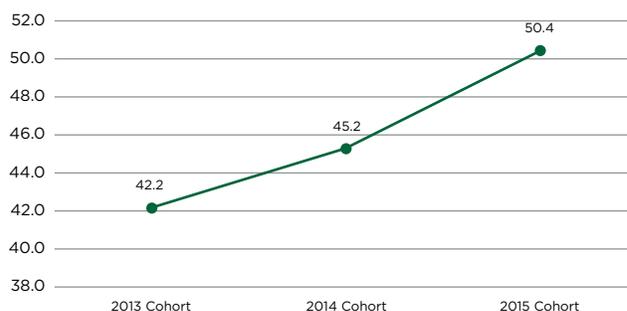
Tracking through the first year of the initiative, fall 2014 to fall 2015 retention rates also increased to the highest level in at least 15 years to 73.7 percent. If MTSU's fall 2015 first-year retention rate had remained the same as it was in fall 2013, an estimated 140 students would not have remained at the university. Fall 2016 census data show that first-year retention rates increased again to 76.1%, reflecting the highest level in the modern history of the institution (Figure 1).

Figure 1: MTSU First-Year Retention Rates



MTSU students are not only persisting and retaining at higher levels, but a larger proportion are making more significant progress toward their degrees. In fall 2013 and spring 2014, 42.2 percent of new first-year students earned 30 or more hours in their first two semesters of study, which is considered full-time enrollment to earn a degree on time; in fall 2015 and spring 2016, 50.4 percent of new first-year students earned 30 or more hours in their first semester of study (Figure 2).

Figure 2: MTSU Percent of first-year students completing at least 30 hours by the end of spring semester



LESSONS LEARNED

Colleges and universities can make meaningful progress, often in a relatively short time. But, as the MTSU team learned, transformative, meaningful, and sustainable change seems contingent upon several elements:

- ▶ **Engaged, authentic, and committed leadership is essential.** When presidents, provosts, deans, and other campus leaders act collaboratively and intentionally, the stage is set for successful student success initiatives.
- ▶ **The identification of a manageable number of strategic priorities will enable the institution to focus its resources on initiatives that have the greatest potential for significant returns.** When every stakeholder or department attempts to do everything for everyone, valuable resources are thinned, initiative fatigue emerges, and significant, sustainable results are unlikely.
- ▶ **Identifying and communicating regularly key strategic performance measures to campus stakeholders is crucial.** When accountability systems are properly implemented, it becomes a cultural expectation for every leader to know their numbers—in other words, how their area is performing—at all times.

Table 1. MTSU Sample Table of Weekly Retention Projection Report, by College

Retention Tracking, All Undergrads, by College, as of 05-16-16				
Week 17, Percent of Students Enrolled in Fall who are Registered for the following Fall				
	Fall 2013 Students Registered for Fall 2014	Fall 2014 Students Registered for Fall 2015	Fall 2015 Students Registered for Fall 2016	percentage point difference from previous year
All Undergrads	67.2	70.2	71.7	1.5
Basic & Applied Sciences	69.1	71.7	73.2	1.5
Behavioral & Health Sciences	68.6	71.7	71.5	-0.2
Business	65.7	69.6	72.3	2.7
Education	71.8	72.1	74.1	2
Liberal Arts	67.6	69.5	74.1	4.6
Media & Entertainment	70.8	74.2	76	1.8
University College	54.9	58.6	57.8	-0.8