Using Data to Exceed Expectations for Student Success

INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

While Morgan State University has consistently graduated students at expected rates, given its students and institutional mission,[1] its vision was to graduate students at higher rates than expected. Morgan has an enrollment of approximately 6,300 undergraduate students, and 95 percent receive some type of financial aid while more than 50 percent are eligible for Pell grants. Morgan State University students are primarily African American, first-time, full-time students who enroll immediately after completing high school. Many are also first-generation college students and more than 65 percent require developmental coursework.

In 2003, in an effort to promote and increase student success, Morgan State University created the Office of Student Success and Retention (OSSR) within the division of Academic Affairs under the Provost. The purpose of the OSSR is to collaborate with the leadership, faculty, and the various academic support programs across the university's colleges and schools to provide continuous, high-quality support for undergraduate students—particularly those identified as "at-risk" - from their first enrollment to graduation.

In 2013, Morgan State University was awarded a $100,000 grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, for the implementation of Integrated Planning and Advising Services (IPAS) technology. Morgan identified Starfish Retention Solutions as its designated IPAS system, for implementation by spring 2014, and named the new initiative Morgan's STAR (Student, Technology, and Retention) Enterprise. Starfish Early Alert and Starfish Connect products, also purchased with the IPAS funding, assisted Morgan in two focused areas: providing personalized counseling and coaching to students, and monitoring, targeting, and intervening at the first sign of trouble.

USING DATA TO IMPROVE STUDENT OUTCOMES

The initial goals of Morgan's STAR Enterprise were 1) to increase early alerts initiated by faculty; 2) to increase students' use of campus support resources; 3) to provide seamless, transparent, and user-friendly monitoring and tracking of students in groups that historical data showed to be high-risk for stopping or dropping out; and 4) to provide a single online resource from which faculty, staff and students can access feedback and action plans for student success. OSSR has served as the lead department for the STAR Enterprise adoption and implementation. Because OSSR staff were working as academic coaches and counselors already and targeting students for strategic interventions based on broad groupings of students who had historically struggled to complete their degrees, they were an ideal group to begin partnering with Starfish Retention Solutions and using IPAS.

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1   The University of California – Los Angeles's Higher Education Research Institute maintains an Expected Graduation Rate Calculator (http://www.heri.ucla.edu /GradRateCalculator.php) that predicts graduation rates based on student body demographics and preparation. Morgan's predicted graduation rate matches their current graduation rate of 32%.

Where it once took many hours to identify students, contact them individually, and record data manually into documents that were inaccessible to other campus data systems, IPAS has allowed OSSR staff have become more efficient and available to students for in-person coaching and mentoring. OSSR advisors no longer identify students in a "vacuum," but now access information through Starfish to identify, track, advise, and intervene with students in a way that is transparent to students, faculty, and other campus constituents such as academic deans, counselors, and athletic coaches. Students also, for the first time, have one portal to view their faculty, mentors, and advisors' outreach efforts and recommendations.

Faculty, with little change to their current workload, can submit early alerts for students in their courses, and can see who on campus has followed up on the alert(s). Additionally, because of the early alert(s), faculty can identify which students have accessed resources on campus such as academic support, mentoring, or tutoring. Faculty and staff raise flags in the system, which alert students via email to see their advisors to address specific challenges. Once the problem has been resolved, flags are cleared.

RESULTS

Table 1 below displays the changes in grades for students with Starfish alerts from mid-term to the end of the year for spring 2014, fall 2014, and spring 2015. For all three terms, the majority of students with D grades at mid-term raised their grades to C or better by the end of the semester.

An analysis from spring 2014 through spring 2015 found that not only did the majority of participating students with D grades improve, but 1) the mean cumulative GPA of students with flags has been above 2.0, with about 75 percent of these students ending the semester with GPAs at or above 2.0; and 2) student satisfaction with advising, reflected by answers to the annual University Student Satisfaction Survey, increased from 2.4 to 2.6 on a 4.0 scale.

Furthermore, Morgan State is on track to achieving their 50 percent graduation rate goal, having seen record increases in annual retention rates for students for the last five years. Morgan State increased its retention rate from 67 percent to 73 percent, a climb that had been maintained for four consecutive cohorts (since 2010). For the fall 2014 and fall 2015 freshman cohorts, after the implementation of Starfish Retention Solutions Early Alert & Connect technologies, the retention rate rose by four points to 76 percent for two consecutive years, Morgan's highest retention rate in 20 years and the second highest retention rate ever recorded. This was achieved through the combinations of new innovations, early intervention strategies, systematic tracking and monitoring, and academic coaching and mentoring as described above.

In November 2015, Morgan state University accepted the prestigious Project Degree Completion (PDC) Award from the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities. Morgan is the only HBCU to ever have won the national award designed to identify, recognize, and reward institutions that employ innovative approaches to improve student success and degree completion.

Table 1: Mid-term-to-End-of-term course grades for students with Starfish Alerts

Status	Spring 2014			Fall 2014			Spring 2015		
	Total N	N with C or Better	% C or Better	Total N	N with C or Better	% C or Better	Total N	N with C or Better	% C or Better
Active D	2688	1900	71%	456	309	68%	527	319	61%
Active F	3727	1302	35%	609	165	27%	725	219	30%
Cleared D	483	355	73%	733	411	56%	492	290	59%
Cleared F	869	339	39%	1392	327	23%	1024	258	25%

LESSONS LEARNED

Morgan State's experience revealed the following lessons and recommendations.

▶ **Explicit support from senior leadership is critical to faculty and staff buy-in and initiative success**. While Morgan State has had to incorporate ongoing staff time and effort as well as annual maintenance and licensing fees into the annual fiscal budget, the cost-benefit analysis suggests that these are wise investments that will promote long-term student success.

▶ **External evaluators can offer key insights**. Morgan State's STAR Enterprise has been evaluated by Community College Research Center (CCRC) at Columbia University. A March 2015 preliminary report by the CCRC outlined the following preliminary recommendations for Morgan's IPAS initiative to sustain progress: 1) standardizing processes for raising flags and recording information from student meetings with their advisors; 2) improving the connection between flags and campus resources to support student success; and 3) continuing to build faculty and student buy-in. These recommendations now serve as the primary goals of Morgan's STAR Enterprise, along with adding capacity for more targeted educational planning over the course of student's career.

▶ **Lay groundwork for future growth and improvements**. Faculty members on Morgan's IPAS Advisory Committee are also designing comprehensive, system-level evaluation models to track associations and correlations between 1) flags raised in Starfish and final course grades; 2) results in courses in which Starfish progress surveys were completed and results in courses in which progress surveys were not completed; and 3) course outcomes from semester to semester.