

Student Success Insights Blog

Achieving rapid, meaningful gains: A Q&A with MTSU

on May 13, 2015 |

As a follow up to last month's [re-enrollment campaign post](#), which featured a glimpse into some of the work Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU) is doing, we wanted to bring you the full story of what the university has been able to accomplish in the few short months that they've been up and running with SSC.

Since joining the Collaborative last spring and going live with SSC this past fall, MTSU has already seen gains of [2.2%](#), [4.5%](#), and [2.1% from fall to spring persistence](#) for their freshmen, new transfers, and sophomores, respectively. **Rick Sluder, Vice Provost at MTSU**, believes this is just the beginning.

Having joined MTSU in Sept. 2014 after years of leading similar efforts at [University of Central Missouri](#), Rick Sluder had the rare opportunity to launch SSC for a second time. We sat down with him for an interview to hear what his recipe for success has been.



1. You've managed to get a lot done in a few short months. What's your secret?

Strong leadership, tremendous advisors, and a comprehensive technology system are essential elements of the foundation for success at MTSU.

But it starts with leadership. When you have a president and provost who make student success the primary focus for the entire institution, it sends a strong signal to everyone on campus, and things get simple. While this puts pressure on key leaders being held accountable for the outcome of such initiatives, it also clarifies expectations, which I find incredibly empowering.

I've also been very fortunate to be surrounded by an amazingly talented, passionate, and innovative group of advisors. This team, including our academic leaders, has been able to execute and, in turn, realize the achievements that we're already seeing at MTSU.

Finally, the technology platform is really what brings it all together by creating a unified infrastructure through which we can better understand our university and ultimately help more students succeed. As our work with SSC has evolved, our dedicated consultant and other leaders at EAB have offered subtle suggestions that have produced profound effects.

Not a member of SSC?

Learn more about how we're partnering with institutions nationwide to boost retention and completion. [Speak with an expert today.](#)

2. What do you feel you bring to MTSU that is unique and helps drive the student success initiatives that you're leading?

Communication and perseverance. I am relentless about providing regular communication to the broader campus community as a way of keeping initiatives top-of-mind and aligned with our strategic initiatives. In my regular email updates, I highlight

how we're performing, where we're tracking, what's working, and what's up next. I make sure to be succinct and include data, graphs, and examples to reinforce and validate. This is also an opportunity for me to share compelling stories and recognize those front-line faculty and advisors who are going above and beyond.

CONNECTED: The 2015 Annual Summit

Our annual summit, CONNECTED, will bring together members of the Collaborative for two days of learning, sharing, and networking. [Learn more.](#)

3. MTSU is one of the very top utilizers of the SSC platform. How did you make this happen?

Well before the "go live" date for SSC, it was understood that utilization and application of the system in advising workflow was an expectation—advisors could not simply opt out. From the first day of implementation, our advising managers astutely set practices in place so that use of the system became a *habit*, not an exception or add-on.

To initiate the process of using the system for structured outreach campaigns, we started by rallying the advising community around one common theme and goal: re-enrollment. Given the timing of our SSC launch, this made sense. It also seemed to be "low hanging fruit" that would hopefully provide quick and validating results—and it did.

Through a coordinated, campus-wide effort around enrollment, targeted advising campaigns led to realize an [increase of 2.2%, 4.5%, and 2.1% points in FT/FT freshmen, new transfers, and sophomores](#), respectively. At the same time, advisor managers were encouraged to develop micro-campaigns in their area, identifying groups likely to provide early and easy returns on their efforts.

Seeing immediate results from these initiatives has further motivated the campus around our student success initiatives, which has spawned all sorts of new creativity.

4. Can you provide some examples of innovative ideas your team is coming up with at MTSU?

One advisor participating in SSC's specialist program was motivated by recent research coming out of SSC on how to identify truly at-risk students within the "[Murky Middle](#)" population whose fate is typically difficult to determine. She ran a targeted advising campaign around these 2.0 to 3.0, downward-trending GPA students. Not only did her campaign make a difference for several students in the target group, but she was also rewarded for her creativity by being asked to present in front of her fellow SSC specialists.

This is just one of many examples illustrating how you can motivate and empower advisors by providing data, leadership, encouragement, and reward.

5. How have you been able to engage faculty in your student success initiatives?

The SSC predictive workbook data has given us incredible insight into the institution's most predictive courses, 10 of which will have been redesigned by the end of this summer. Before my arrival, MTSU had already initiated and completed a number of other course redesigns, which we've since been able to assess using SSC data.

Faculty involvement is elemental in any curriculum redesign. Providing data has been essential in not only identifying which courses might need additional attention, but also in giving faculty context for why it's needed and makes sense. And from my perspective, MTSU's most predictive courses show what a great job faculty have done with instruction—the predictive utility is near perfect, which expresses to faculty the importance of designing and offering curricula that enhance the learning

experience for all students.

I've found that providing data in a digestible format and asking for faculty involvement means everything. Additionally, sharing stories of curriculum redesign and providing financial incentives motivates faculty to consider if a redesign might be right for their course.

6. What are some other student success initiatives outside of SSC that you'd like to share with your peers?

Upon my arrival on campus, I sought to form excellent working relationships with key faculty and staff handling institutional data. A leader in the enrollment area provided me with important insights on institutional processes and data. A colleague in IT provided advice and access to institutional databases. Staff in IR readily provided support to set up a user-friendly system for institutional benchmarking. I feel it's imperative to have effective communications systems with performance metrics. And in order to know what's performing—and what isn't—I needed full insight into our institutional data.

So I worked with the IR department to develop a way of tracking, for example, registration for the spring term compared against each of the past 6 years, week-by-week, at the university, college, and department levels. I include these benchmarks in my communications to let everyone know where we are as compared to previous years. This will help us understand where to focus our efforts and attention in the weeks ahead. A lot of institutions might wait until January (or August) for census, but we know well in advance, which allows us to be nimble, adjust strategies, and shape the future.

Learn More About MTSU's Work with SSC

Continue reading to find out how, through its partnership with SSC, MTSU was able to increase overall persistence by 1.5 percentage points, retaining an additional 390 students for \$1.5M in spring tuition revenue.

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