RETENTION dian schaffhauser

Turning Around an Enrollment Decline

When Mesa Community College needed to crank up enrollment retention, it turned to an outside company for help. The result was a striking 9x return on investment.

THERE'S A DIFFERENCE between seeing a national trend of shrinking enrollment in two-year public institutions and feeling the hit at your own college. While the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center reported that two-year publics saw a 2.6 percent drop in student enrollment for fall 2016, **Mesa Community College** was facing a decline of 6 to 8 percent for the same period, one more data point in a series of waning enrollment numbers for the Arizona school. Surely, there was something that could be done to turn around enrollment retention.

According to Christine Bullock, IT project manager for Mesa's College Technology Services, the college's Office of Recruitment & Outreach has long made contact with students via education fairs, college prep workshops, mailings, e-mails, texts and in-person visits. Yet a phone call would provide a personal touch that could really lift response. "Someone calling a student, even if it only results in leaving a voicemail, puts that little bug in the student's ear and reminds them, 'Oh, I might need to make sure I have my financial aid submitted on time,' or 'Oh, I forgot to check and see if I could take that math class this summer instead of waiting until the fall,'" she explained. "You tend to get a better response from that."

But how to make those phone calls? One option would be to set up a call center inside the college using internal resources. Of course, that would require hiring and

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training staff over a period of months; more infrastructure would be needed; and a call center didn't exactly fall into Mesa's core mission of teaching and learning. The conclusion: "We didn't have the internal staff to do mass call campaigns — upwards of 40,000 calls over two weeks," noted Bullock.

Instead, college leaders looked to outside help. The institution and its district, **Maricopa Community Colleges**, had a long relationship with <u>Blackboard</u>. Blackboard reps, aware of Mesa's concerns, queried the college: Would there be any interest in partnering on a call campaign to drive student re-engagement? Under the guidance of interim President Sasan Poureetezadi and then-interim Vice President of IT Andrew Giddings, a contract was signed in August 2015. However, cultural concerns and additional planning efforts kept the experiment at bay for another year.

Campaign Briefing

The initial fall 2016 campaign sought to reach two specific groups of students by phone: 1) people who had applied but hadn't completed the entire application process to the point where they'd registered for courses; and 2) students who had attended "a semester or two ago" but hadn't re-enrolled. Calling these individuals provides an opportunity "to touch base with the student and to ask them why they didn't re-enroll or why they're not interested in returning to Mesa," said Bullock.

The largest response from those who chose not to come

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Mesa Community College

2 campuses

Fall 2017 enrollment: 20,424

Average student age: 25

Full-time/Part-time enrollment: 31%/69%

back to Mesa tended to be the one the college actually wanted to hear: The student had transferred to a four-year school or met all of his or her educational goals by attaining a credential or associate's degree. But others responded that a new job got in the way or they had transportation problems.

Those responses "bring up additional opportunities," Bullock noted. "Maybe there's something we can do there — work with the city to get free bus passes or something else."

To kick off the initial calling campaign, Bullock worked with Carmen Prado Newland, dean of enrollment services, to develop a calling script. That included screenshots so the Blackboard call agents would see exactly what a student would see if he or she were sent online. And after a few days of testing, it underwent a bit of revision.

Blackboard's reps would serve as a tier-one level of outreach. Outfitted with data pulled from Mesa's student information system, the agent could begin the call with a personalized opening: for instance, "I see you haven't completed your testing..." or "I see you need to come in and do your ID authentication for in-state residency; you can take a photo of that and submit it through this link if you'd like...."

The script also included rerouting information. "We have a financial aid hotline at the district," said Bullock, "so we informed the agents that if the student had that kind of question, they could either direct them to the FAFSA website or route them to another line that we use for financial aid support." While financial aid was at the top of the list of student problems, other typical questions would involve overrides on courses or questions about credit transfers from other schools.

When the agents couldn't handle a question, they'd do a real-time call forward back to college staff in Prado Newland's student services center. Bullock said the college made around 10 student services specialists available during each calling campaign to handle those transfer calls.

If it was after-hours or on weekends or the student couldn't talk at that moment, the agents would ask if the student wanted a call back; then Mesa personnel would return the call within 48 hours, during college business hours.

Each call was documented for tracking purposes, and Blackboard provided an Excel spreadsheet to the college every morning at 6 a.m. By cross-referencing that information with Mesa's student information system, internal staff were able to understand the nature of each call and directly respond without the student having to repeat the story. ▶

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Return on Investment

By now the college has become a practiced player in running the calling campaigns, which have proven highly successful semester after semester. After that initial test, which involved reaching out to about 10,000 students, Mesa has undertaken additional campaigns for every semester since.

About a month prior to the start of the term, the campaign kicks into gear. In an engagement snapshot Giddings shared in an Educause presentation last fall, he offered these numbers: Over the course of three sets of calling campaigns — fall 2016, spring 2017 and summer 2017 — Blackboard made contact with 12,247 students, resulting in 7,584 students enrolling and a total of $969,932 in additional revenue.

In fall 2016, for example, 2,126 students completed their applications following the calls; 586 students re-enrolled. That generated $416,522 in tuition revenue. During spring 2017, 1,531 students finished the enrollment process and 211 re-enrolled.

Just as importantly, across those campaigns, the college has seen a 12 percent increase in persistence rates among both current and prior-term students. That's where an even bigger payoff comes — in stop-loss prevention and recovery, which has generated $3.74 million in tuition revenue.

How accurate are those figures? As Bullock observed, a certain percentage of students would have enrolled even if they hadn't been contacted by Blackboard. Teasing those numbers out of the total was done this way: During the campaign, a certain number of students who are called are classified as "unreachable." While Blackboard will attempt up to five phone calls on the same individual, some of them have incorrect, outdated or disconnected phone numbers in the SIS. In other cases, a household member other than the student is reached. Among all of those individual students, some enrolled in class "without a nudge or contact," said Bullock, producing "a baseline for the percentage of students who would have enrolled anyway."

Across all three sets of campaigns, the Blackboard services cost about $149,000, generating a 900 percent return on investment based on enrollment growth.

Now the college is considering another expansion of its work with Blackboard to encompass a coaching option. That would involve assigning a Blackboard person as a coach to make "repeated contact with [a student] over a period of three months," for example, "to ensure they're following through with their applications for enrollment," said Bullock. "They're not acting as advisers, they're not acting on behalf of Mesa; they're just adding to the student success." **CT**

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LESSONS
LEARNED

Numbers matter. The third-party call center approach probably wouldn't pan out financially for smaller subsets of students (say, up to a thousand) due to the startup costs, time requirements and intense academic adviser demand, said Christine Bullock, IT project manager for Mesa Community College. "If a college wants to go after a small focus group of students — all the honor students or all of the international students — that might be more cost-effective to do in-house with a group of academic or student services employees who are Mesa's subject-matter experts."

Your internal staff could become more effective. In the Mesa setup, where Blackboard agents handled tier-one level requests, the college's internal support people were able to be more responsive. Because they were getting "the questions with the background, they could do the research to answer the students in advance of calling them," added Bullock. "It was very focused and more rewarding for our staff to assist them in that exact response."

Expect diminishing returns. The pool of students to call will get smaller with each campaign. As Bullock noted, "You've contacted a lot of the previous semester's students already. So you leave out the ones for the next campaign who have already said they're not interested in returning to the college."