Retention

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.

By Dian Schaffhauser | 06/14/18

There's a difference between being part of a national trend of shrinking enrollment in two-year public institutions and having it hit 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 a long history of making contact with students via education fairs, college prep workshops, mailings, e-mails, texts and in-person visits. But 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 rather than from e-mail and flyers."

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

Fast Facts

Mesa Community College

2 campuses

Fall 2017 enrollment: 20,424

Average student age: 25

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

Instead, college leaders thought it might be time to bring in outside help. The institution had a long relationship with Blackboard; the college uses the vendor's analytics software, and its district, Maricopa Community Colleges, uses Blackboard financial aid and help desk contact center applications. 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, help

identify interested students, offer them assistance, and find out why they might be opting out of the school? 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 campaign, put in place in time for the fall 2016 semester, sought to reach two specific groups of students by phone:

- People who had applied but hadn't completed the entire application process to the point where they'd registered for courses; and
- Students who had attended "a semester or two ago" but hadn't re-enrolled.

By calling these individuals, said Bullock, "It gives us the 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."

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