CASE STUDY: COLLEGE OF SOUTHERN MARYLAND

Finding near completers and getting them to the next stage

With the help of technology, the College of Southern Maryland found creative ways to boost graduation

For nearly every institution, graduation rates are the holy grail when it comes to metrics. It's the yardstick against which any college must measure itself, and it's the one number—if low or steadily dropping—that can spur serious action on campus. And for community colleges, powering a graduation rate on an upward trajectory is critical for success.

When the College of Southern Maryland (CSM) found itself wrestling with chronically low graduation rates, it began to look for ways to reverse the trend. "Just like many community colleges, we were struggling with our graduation rate for our first-time, full-time degree and certificate-seeking students," says Carol Harrison, registrar at the College of Southern Maryland. "We were at a 13 percent graduation rate for our students, which was very low."

CSM determined that one of the prevailing reasons why its graduation rate was low is because many students simply don't understand where they are in the educational journey. They may not be aware of how many credits they have—or

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CSM college of southern maryland

Enrollment
7,200

Primary challenge
Boost graduation rates and help students earn degrees or credentials

Solution
Ellucian Colleague®

Results
Improved graduation rate, from 13 percent to 28 percent

Streamlined institutional processes

Better and more accurate insights into institutional data

how close they may be to completing a degree or a certificate. "This is such an anomaly for community colleges," says Harrison. "A lot of students don't know that they've completed a credential—because one thing that's unique about community colleges is most students come in thinking they're going to start at the college and then transfer on. They may or may not understand the associate degree. It's not the end game for many of them—their end game is going to be the bachelor's degree."

Many students, Harrison says, may simply transfer to another institution, without realizing that they've done the work needed to graduate from the community college with a recognized degree or certification. And that directly impacts CSM's graduation rates.

Finding a faster, easier way to comb through the data

To combat its flagging completion rates, CSM decided to leverage its campus technology to examine which students were leaving credentials or certificates on the table, and how close they were to completing one. Harrison knew that combing through data manually to find near-completers would be a long, cumbersome process, and might not yield the results she hoped for. "It was difficult for me to pinpoint where these students were in their degrees or credentials, because oftentimes students aren't doing this in order," she

says. "There isn't a capstone course that I can point to say, 'Well, I know if they finished this class, then they probably finish this degree.'"

CSM required a tool that would allow them to pull relevant information from Ellucian Colleague®, their ERP, and compare student information with requirements for degrees and credentials to determine how close these students may be to earning a credential. CSM determined that this information would need to be distilled quickly and easily, so that the institution could conduct this process multiple times during the year—and the process would need to be automated, to maintain efficiency for CSM's small staff.

Reaching out and welcoming back: automated emails and scholarships

CSM and Ellucian worked together to develop a new dashboard and process for batching and analyzing student data, collected from various reports, to locate those who may be close to completing a certification or credential—but who may not realize it. The new process includes a user-friendly dashboard for Harrison and her staff so that they can run reports quickly and easily—with all of the needed information at their fingertips. "We can now look at a 'percentage' for the completion of a degree, so that's how I can find the near-completers and reach out to them to say, 'Hey, you're close,'" says Harrison.

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CAROL HARRISON, Registrar, College of Southern Maryland

Automatically generated emails alert students that they have earned a credential on the way to pursuing a degree, since students may not be aware that they have earned credentials and certificates upon completing a certain number of credits. "When we started to do this, we looked at about 10 years' worth of data," she says, "And we could just run students through and see if they completed their credential. We would reach out to those students and say, 'Hey, did you know you've completed this credential?'"

The first time Harrison ran a batch of near-completion students through the new process, she was astounded. "I just couldn't believe it," she says. "The first time I did it was after our spring cycle. I found about 50 students who had completed the requirements that same semester but for whatever reason didn't apply for graduation. And now typically at the end of fall and spring we will have anywhere from 30 to 60 additional associate degrees awarded, and in the summer, typically somewhere between 20 and 30."

Those kinds of numbers can add up quickly. "In four years, we've raised our graduation rate to 28 percent for cohort 2015," she says. "In that time we have been able to graduate an additional 3,700 students."

These numbers have helped CSM stay ahead of graduation targets established by the state. "In Maryland, we were challenged to have a certain number of graduates by 2025," says Harrison. "We are well above where we need to be on target. Our target is 14,493 graduates by 2025 and we're going to not only meet but exceed that."

The new process has also allowed CSM to institute a program to attract students who have dropped out of college and encourage them to come back and complete their degrees. "Another effort that we undertook is to look for students who are close to completing and have since left CSM and haven't come back," says Harrison. "We reach out to them and offer a $600 scholarship to come back to finish their degree. It's not a lot of money, but every little bit helps, and when we talk about how we can we make an impact on student success and completion, with students who are so close to getting their degree, that's where we can make an impact."

Practical advice for institutions struggling with graduation rates

Harrison is encouraged by the improving graduation rates at CSM, and although the new process is only part of a larger initiative to bump up graduation numbers, it's an integral part of the puzzle—and has the potential to keep paying big dividends down the road. On top of that, the students themselves will benefit from the new process as well. "Making the process of finding near-completers as automated as possible has allowed us to do it three times a year," she says. "And I absolutely think it's been worth our time to do this, because I know that there are definitely community college students who are walking out the door, not knowing that they've finished."

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Registrar, College of Southern Maryland

For other institutions considering a similar approach, Harrison offers a few pieces of advice. "Look at maybe two or three programs that you know that you already have big numbers in and start there," she says. "And that's where you know you're going to get the most bang for your buck. So start with your general studies degree, maybe your business degree, and go back in time anywhere from two to five years, looking for those who may be close to earning credentials, and just see what you get."

Harrison is confident that CSM's success can be replicated on other campuses. "I think this is something a lot of institutions will eventually adopt," she says. "The benefits are just too great."

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