
Wayland Baptist University Sees Retention Gains with Help from Blackboard



Blackboard

Wayland Baptist University (WBU) is a private Baptist university based in Plainview, Texas. The university has approximately 5,000 enrolled students, three quarters of whom are undergraduates. In addition to its main campus in Plainview, WBU has multiple satellite campuses across six states, American Samoa, and Kenya, and a virtual campus, WBUonline.

THE CHALLENGE:

Harnessing data-driven insights to maximize student retention and success

Some 58 percent of institutions rank student retention as higher education's most critical issue. That's no surprise, as higher student retention leads to better student graduation rates and success in the job market. With the

success of their students in mind, WBU officials made the forward-thinking decision to employ a proactive strategy to intervene with students before they decide to drop out and provide them with resources and support to help continue toward graduation.

WBU relies on various Blackboard solutions, including Blackboard Learn as its teaching and learning platform, predictive data for identifying at-risk students, and Enrollment Services for a streamlined enrollment process. When it came to developing and deploying a plan to maximize student success, the university turned to Blackboard Student Services for its expertise and experience with data-driven student retention in higher education.



A program that reaches at-risk students before it's too late

WBU partnered with Blackboard to deliver a program aimed at improving student retention by proactively contacting students as soon as they show up as a risk of failing their academic course. The campaign began in November 2019 and will continue running through Winter 2021 to measure term-to-term and year-over-year results. The goals for the program, *Retention Coaching Powered by Predictive Data*, were threefold:

1. Develop a scalable proactive outreach program that increases term-to-term retention of at-risk students by six to eight percentage points.
2. Collect reliable data on WBU's current retention rates to inform future student success efforts.
3. Gather qualitative information to better understand how students decide to return to WBU, take a term off, or withdraw.

To measure effectiveness, the Blackboard and WBU teams would compare term-to-term and year-to-year persistence of a coached group of students with a control group of students who would not see any intervention. The



coached and control groups were balanced on variables that predicted student persistence, such as campus location, degree level, credits earned, academic program, and start date.

To account for the fact that high risk students require a different level of support than low risk students, Blackboard Student Services delivers unique outreach strategies based on the student level of risk of dropping. High risk students receive more outreach via multiple channels (phone, text, email) while outreach to low risk students includes fewer touches. This allows for a strategic, individualized approach to contacting students, rather than blanketing students of different risk groups with the same message using the same channel.

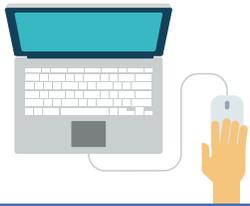
With student risk scores changing daily, the Blackboard Coaching team refreshes their outreach list regularly using algorithms within Blackboard Data. The algorithm uses data points within WBU's student information system, combined with daily updates from the Blackboard Learn learning management system to flag at-risk students. These indicators include but are not limited to cumulative GPA, class GPA, attendance, length of login, last login, previous term GPA, registration for next term, and financial aid documents.

A Holistic Coaching Approach

Blackboard's coaching model focuses on the whole student, not just academic concerns. According to Alby Salsa, Blackboard's Senior Director of Enrollment and Retention Solutions, "Our experience has been consistent with industry research which shows that most student attrition is due to non-academic issues. Today's learner balances many external commitments—their job, family, school, and more—and it's common for students to drop out of school when it becomes hard to juggle all of these responsibilities. In those critical times where a student is considering dropping out of school, it's important they remember their primary motivation for enrolling, and that they have a coach to encourage them and help create specific action plans to mitigate their immediate challenges."

Blackboard's coaching model is grounded in a structured framework that enables coaches and students to have a clear assessment of student risk factors across multiple focus areas that is not limited to academics alone. Once the student has identified their core risk factor, the coach has various methods to help them address it, ranging from student-facing coaching tools, providing recommendations, or referrals to campus resources.

Program Results: First Term



Students in the coached group registered for the Spring 2020 semester at a rate **seven percentage points higher** than that of students in the control group.

12% increase in student retention from winter to spring for the coached group.

Coached cohort registered for Spring 2020 at a rate of **65%** compared to **58%** registration rate of the non-coached population.

78 at-risk students registered for the Spring 2020 semester after talking with a coach.

76% of live coach eligible students registered for the next semester.

“Blackboard’s retention program provides our online students with the proactive support they need, when the need it. I appreciate that the Blackboard coaches quickly follow up with students as soon as they show up as a risk, and when necessary they put these at-risk students in contact with university resources, such as our advising team. I am very pleased with the retention gain that this program has produced.”

Patricia M. Ritschel-Trifilo, Ph.D., Director of WBUonline, Wayland Baptist University

Results

The first-term results showed that students in the coached group registered for the Spring 2020 semester at a rate seven percentage points higher than that of students in the control group. The first-term results also generated reliable data about WBU’s current retention rates, as well as rich qualitative information from students’ conversations with Blackboard Success Coaches about their decision-making process.

Summary

Blackboard and WBU successfully harnessed data-driven insights to deliver a proactive outreach campaign to students at risk of dropping out of college. The first-term program has resulted in a higher term-to-term retention compared with a control population and provided WBU with valuable quantitative and qualitative data to help drive future student success efforts.

“Blackboard’s retention program provides our online students with the proactive support they need, when they need it,” said Patricia M. Ritschel-Trifilo, Ph.D., Director of WBUonline. “I appreciate that the Blackboard coaches quickly follow up with students as soon as they show up as a risk, and when necessary they put these at-risk students in contact with university resources, such as our advising team.”

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