

DMACC Makes the Grade with SAS®

Des Moines Area Community College (DMACC) uses SAS® to efficiently manage its huge store of student data, thus enabling staff to run their own reports for answers on the spot and, ultimately, to perform the predictive analytics necessary to identify at-risk students before it's too late – with answers in hours or days, not months.

Joe DeHart
Executive Director of
Institutional Effectiveness,
Assistant to the President



Industry

Education

Business Issue

Attract and retain students through effective outreach; provide self-service query and reports so that staff has access to the intelligence they need to run their departments efficiently, intelligently.

Solution

SAS® provides powerful analytic capabilities to turn 300 gigabytes of data into meaningful knowledge that the college's various departments can use for making intelligent decisions.

Benefits

Reports that used to take weeks and months are now completed in hours or days; SAS is a one-stop shop that allows almost any staff member to run reports when they need them.

The situation

Joe DeHart, DMACC's Executive Director of Institutional Effectiveness and Assistant to the President, is responsible for making sure staff gain the insights they need to make the right choices about how the college serves its students. "A lot of times we have a ton of data that gets captured on students, their progress, when they come in, and when they go out," he explains. "In addition to providing an overall snapshot of the health of the institution, I provide insight into how programs, processes and systems within DMACC impact our students."

The school's institutional research for which DeHart helps provide insights falls under three areas:

- Recruiting and marketing to see what works and what doesn't.
- Course retention to make sure students do not unnecessarily drop classes and to keep them successful in their studies from term to term.
- Follow-up to track students once they leave to make sure DMACC provides the right training to ensure student success at four-year schools or to make sure they learned the proper job skills needed to get ahead in the employment market.

"We take pride in knowing we've done everything we can while the students are here so that if they're not successful, they know they've given it a try and they know they can come back to us if they need anything in the future," DeHart says. "The work we do with SAS gives us the

confidence of knowing that we've provided them with that experience."

The challenges

DMACC's president has set a goal that, by 2012, the college will be first in the nation on indicators such as retention, graduation rates and market penetration, DeHart says. To measure progress, DeHart uses SAS in his comparisons with data from the State of Iowa as well as from comparable institutions around the United States.

"SAS is the lynchpin to all that marries what we keep internally with what we're looking at externally – whether that's benchmark data, unemployment insurance data or national student clearinghouse data," he says. "At some point, it all flows through SAS to make sense of it."



Before implementing SAS, DMACC could never accept such a challenge. In fact, DeHart says, the college spent "a lot of time and money" on a competitor's product, and it was not up and running even after a couple of years. When DeHart joined the college staff, he brought with him knowledge of SAS. "We bought a server and the software, and we started down that road," he recalls. "Within six months, we had some pieces of information in place that were starting to build that culture of using SAS for decision making."

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DMACC had previously relied on the SCT Banner system for its reporting, which lacked the point-and-click ease of SAS and made it nearly impossible for anyone but power users to glean useful information from it. “What they got was paper, and it might have been a report that they only wanted a piece of, and so they’d have to dig through a 50-page report to find what they need and then enter it into a spreadsheet,” DeHart explains. “It was very labor-intensive.”

SAS allows anyone to query the data on their own and receive reports in a format that is most useful for them – be it Excel, PDF or another format.

“And the nice thing is that I don’t have to worry about the data being accurate,” DeHart says. “With SAS, I know all the fields are correct and that the users can slice and dice the data and it’s always going to be correct. Before, we had a lot of interpretative data in which someone would run a manual process but not be able to repeat it the next semester because they forgot how they did it.

Measuring KPIs

Using SAS, DMACC can monitor key measures as compared to the previous year in a number of areas, including enrollment, persistence and retention. “If it’s a budget issue, we want to know as of April 1 where we are in terms of revenue as compared to April 1 of

last year,” DeHart says. “We look at the profitability of our food service; HR uses it to make sure each faculty member meets requirements to make sure they are qualified to teach certain courses; and in Continuing Education we look at contact hours and credit hours.”

SAS allows DeHart to keep his reporting systems automated so that jobs know when to run themselves. “Manual processes allow for misinterpretation, so reporting can be error-prone and time-consuming,” he says. “Because many of the jobs we run are automated, I just look for problems; I don’t have to do the day-to-day work once everything is built. Now, I can do what used to take months in a matter of days – if not hours.”

DMACC’s President, Rob Denson, feels that leveraging student data with SAS to do institutional research has been essential to DMACC’s ability to increase enrollment and retain students. “Being able to access data effectively provides insight into our core services and their impact on students’ lives,” he says. “And it allows us to focus enrollment management and marketing efforts in ways that add value to our students’ experience at DMACC. This directly benefits the student and the college.”

Looking ahead

Besides ease of use and quick turnaround on reporting, the unique advantage that SAS

offers DMACC comes from predictive analytics. With institutional research programs well under way, DeHart is now focusing his efforts on enrollment management.

For example, pulling from the 300 gigabytes of data in DMACC’s Oracle database, DeHart used SAS to look at market penetration by ZIP code. “We were able to identify high minority areas, and we realized that we were set up as the Iowa of 50 years ago,” he says. “We saw how things are changing and that we needed to adapt to meet those needs.”

As a result, DMACC invested in recruiting efforts to attract more minority students as well as lower-income students in part through improving the college’s financial aid system. “SAS was part of that ‘a-ha!’ moment when we thought we were doing things right, but when we looked at localities we realized we had work to do,” DeHart says. “SAS has allowed us to put our money where our mouth is in terms of putting resources behind the things we’ve said we’re about.”

“That’s what sets SAS apart from its competitors,” he adds. “It’s a one-stop shop that can turn any type of data into something that’s finished, meaningful, insightful, intelligible – something that people can make decisions with.”



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TO KNOW.

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