

ALABAMA POSTS GAINS IN RECRUITING, RETENTION

On a recent stroll across the University of Alabama campus, Cali Davis, Associate Director of Data Analysis and Specialized Recruitment, was struck by the number of students she saw. Campus is more crowded these days – enrollment is up by 40 percent in the last three years, she notes with satisfaction. That's a sure sign that, with help from SAS®, the school's recruitment and retention work is paying off.

Dr. Michael Hardin
Professor of Statistics and
Associate Dean of Research

Business Issue

Recruit and retain the best and brightest students.

Solution

SAS® provides predictive analytics that help the university intervene before at-risk students drop out, and SAS helps identify high school students who are most likely to be interested in enrolling.

Benefits

Increased revenue through successful recruitment and retention helps fund capital expenses and other projects that will, in turn, help attract more students.

Using SAS for predictive analytics as part of a strategic enrollment plan, Davis is gaining insights into student behavior that she shares with recruiters in various states. In turn, the recruiters can target students most likely to be interested in the University of Alabama.

Meanwhile, students in a data mining certificate course offered by Dr. Michael Hardin, Professor of Statistics and Associate Dean of Research in the university's business college, put what they're learning in the classroom to real-world use in support of Davis' work.

A combination of efforts, including the university's use of SAS, resulted in a 40 percent increase in the size of the freshman class over three years. At the same time, student retention climbed from 82 percent to 85 percent. Now the school has its sights set on 90 percent retention.

"This translates into a need for expansion," Davis explains. "UA has completed two new resident halls and an interdisciplinary science building, with a third resident hall under construction. It also translates into more dollars for the community because when parents come to visit, they inevitably take their children shopping."

In fact, the loss of 100 students can have an overall economic impact of losing \$3 million over four years, Davis and Hardin say.

Keeping students coming back

The University of Alabama's partnership of enrollment strategy and the classroom was born when Hardin's data mining stu-

dents began working with the school's enrollment office to identify freshmen at risk of dropping out. By looking at data points such as college entrance test scores, grade-point averages and demographic features like single-parent-hood, university staff had reason to intervene early enough to prevent students from dropping out.

"Our challenge was to use university records to routinely recognize students who might be having problems and take steps to prevent them from leaving," Hardin says. "With SAS, we were able to take existing data and identify students on a routine basis instead of creating a bunch of highly specialized measures and adding significant data collection costs."

The university used techniques such as logistic regression, decision trees and neural networks to pinpoint freshmen most at risk of dropping out. "Now we're providing personalized, individual contact that will help students connect to the university and return to Alabama," Hardin says. "High-risk freshmen meet with academic advisors who stay in contact with the freshmen to make sure they are adjusting successfully."

Attracting the best, the brightest

The school also relies on SAS for predictive analytics to find out which high school students are most likely to want to attend the University of Alabama. Davis can then share the results of her work with recruiters who live in states outside of Alabama where significant numbers of prospects reside.



“As a result of admissions’ efforts – and with help from SAS – we’re seeing our recruitment climb by 40 percent in the last three years and retention numbers improving from 82 percent to 85 percent.”

Cali Davis

Associate Director of Data Analysis and Specialized Recruitment
University of Alabama

Davis captures data on college choice preference, financial aid and scholarship awards, ACT and SAT scores, and on in-state or out-of-state residency status. This additional data helps Davis segment students in a variety of ways, including by state or region, so that the school can find out how best to market itself in a particular area. Focus-group testing helps confirm what Davis’ analytics with SAS reveal.

“As a result of admissions’ efforts – and with help from SAS – we’re seeing our recruitment and retention numbers improving,” Davis says, “and we’re seeing an increase in the quality of our students in terms of their high school grade-point averages and ACT/SAT scores.”

As recruitment and retention improve, so does the university’s financial bottom line. By increasing revenues, the University of Alabama can continue to improve educational and quality-of-life components that will, in turn, further help the school to attract and retain the best and brightest students, Hardin says.

“We are one of the first universities to use data mining for retention and all the way through the cycle to include intervention as well as recruitment,” he adds. “I don’t know how we would have done this without help from SAS.”



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