CASE STUDY

Boosting Course Completion in Gateway Courses

University of Northern Colorado, Public Doctoral University in Greeley, Colorado

- **About**: University of Northern Colorado (UNC) is a public university with a total undergraduate enrollment of 10,011.
- **Challenge**: UNC leadership started an initiative to improve course completion, but were uncertain of where to focus efforts.
- **Opportunity**: Using Academic Performance Solutions (APS), UNC discovered high degrees of variation in section completion rates among gateway courses.
- **Solution**: UNC reinvested in its training for graduate students, leveraging best practices from Academic Affairs Forum’s *Course Completion Playbook*, to better equip instructors with specific strategies and tactics to drive student progress.

**Impact Highlights**

1.5%

Increase in completion rate in seven targeted gateway courses1 from Fall 2017 to Fall 2018

### Pinpointing Opportunities Through Drilldown Analyses in APS

The UNC Leadership Team, in partnership with their APS Consultant, analyzed their course completion data using the APS Platform to uncover specific opportunities for improvement.

**Identifying Courses for Prioritization**

Prioritized **eight gateway courses** with the most unearned credit hours spanning **six departments**

- Chemistry
- English
- History
- Mathematics
- Psychology
- Statistics

8,000+

Unearned Credit Hours Over Three Years

Further analysis revealed a large portion of gateway course sections were led by graduate student instructors and had significant **instructor variation** in section completion rates. For example, an introductory chemistry course had a 35.5 percentage point difference between the highest and lowest section’s completion rates.

### Section Completion Rates for Introductory Chemistry

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Completion Rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>95.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>78.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>75.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>72.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>71.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>59.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

35.5%

Difference in Highest and Lowest Completion Rates

10 percentage points higher than the average range across the APS collaborative2

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1) Eight courses were targeted; however, at this time data is only available for seven of the courses.
2) Average range of completion rates for APS Collaborative is 25%, based on analysis of courses with 5 or more sections at 35 institutions for Academic Year 2015

Source: Academic Performance Solutions data and analyses.
Revamping Training with Best Practice Research to Improve Course Completion

UNC’s Project Coordinator worked with the Associate Provost and Dean of the Graduate School to support graduate student instructors who teach a large share of gateway courses. To fully embed these new skills and strategies across the university, they redesigned the TA training to include all TAs – not only those who taught the gateway courses that had been identified.

Three-Pronged Approach to Course Completion Improvement

1. Established Steering Committee
   UNC created a steering committee representing different departments to examine TA practices and compile TA training curriculum.

2. Redesigned Training Curriculum
   Training curriculum focused on personal, professional, and institutional strategies and skills designed to improve student progress.

3. Focusing on Continuous Improvement
   Follow up trainings centered around readiness, accountability, support, and ethics for TAs.

EAB Best Practices Supported Training Curriculum Redesign

Academic Affairs Forum’s Course Completion Playbook was incorporated into the curriculum as required reading. The playbook outlines a series of tactics including, Standardized Assessments for courses with multiple sections.

Best Practice: Standardized Assessment

- Understand the pitfalls of grading practices
  Grading based on concept mastery instead of “grading on a curve”
- Provide faculty with resources on assessment
  Information on different types of assessment, when to use them, how to create them, and how to administer them
- Support use of shared materials by instructors
  Consistent use of materials across sections

Projected Impact Through APS Partnership

UNC received positive feedback, with some returning TAs remarking that they had never received training at this caliber and found the specific intervention methods useful. UNC plans to continue training to support course completion improvement and expand to other types of faculty, as well as monitor section completion rates in gateway courses to measure impact.

Impact After First Term

1.5% increase in completion rates in 7 targeted gateway courses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Additional Students Earning Credit</th>
<th>Additional Student Credit Hours Earned</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>75</td>
<td>222</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Anticipating Additional Impacts in the First Year

Projected increases for Spring and Summer 2018

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>With 3% completion rate increase</th>
<th>With 5% completion rate increase</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>204</td>
<td>339</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional Student Credit Hours Earned</td>
<td>Additional Student Credit Hours Earned</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Academic Performance Solutions data and analyses; The Course Completion Playbook, Academic Affairs Forum.