Incorporating Modality Analysis to Move the Needle in Student Success

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Abstract

Over the last two decades higher education has experienced continuous growth in online education, with students and faculty enjoying the flexibility. With that flexibility came new pedagogies, new course preps, and a new era of teaching, learning, and academic planning. Just as those in the classroom had to modify behaviors and strategies, administrators had the opportunity to modify student support strategies seeking to increase student success and retention. We embraced that opportunity at Middle Georgia State University and engaged students across modalities in meaningful ways with an integrated academic master plan. In a short period of time we realized significant gains and were able to design a course schedule that maximized campus presence and student success while meeting the demand for flexible, online programming.

Introduction

Middle Georgia State University is located in the heart of Georgia with its main campus in Macon. The university was created in 2012 through the consolidation of Macon State College

and Middle Georgia College, resulting in a new university that spread across five campuses and 180 square miles. This created a natural environment for online coursework embedded within programs to maximize flexibility for students on multiple campuses. We found it was much more engaging for faculty and learners to have well-designed online and hybrid courses with a community of 15-20 rather than five lower enrolled courses across multiple campuses which limited peer to peer interactions and the overall college experience.

With greater competition coming out of the pandemic, decreasing prospect pools, and the anticipation of decreasing resources, we turned to improve retention as a method to increase enrollments. College administrators view retention rates as indicators of the quality of faculty instruction, support services, and student success (Barbatis, 2010). The pandemic encouraged us to embrace better design, mentoring, and engagement in the online classroom, followed closely by our return to campus where face to face engagement seemed foreign and inconvenient at first. Complementing this was our need to ensure significant support services were offered in a variety of modalities. We became very good at online design and delivery and were soon confronted with a question from students and faculty alike, why return to campus? Our analysis was driven by an idea that similar to the fact that we all learn in different ways (Willingham, Hughes, & Dobolyi, 2015), we may also learn and engage differently across modalities by subject and class structure. The results were certainly not definitive for all learners, but we were able to direct at risk learners into modalities where they were more likely to find success.

Background

Middle Georgia State University (MGA) was in the midst of years five and six of the Momentum Approach, a multi-year data-driven student success initiative focusing on course success rates, retention, persistence, and graduation. Each year we focused on one big idea that would impact student success. MGA's 2021 big idea was to develop strategies and practices that build the academic mindset as an institutional culture. Using the lens of the academic mindset, strategies were planned to address institutional goals. We gathered a team of nine individuals, representing advising, student success centers, registrar's office, deans, the provost's office, residential life, career and leadership development, and instructional designers to serve as our champions. These individuals were split into committees to develop action items that incorporated the academic mindset while addressing student success goals.

The teams questioned whether variables could be analyzed to find significant differences in student performance across modalities and campuses. Specifically, whether failure rates were significantly related to modality after controlling for instructor and campus. The analysis was completed in part based on prior research that found classroom design and furniture options were significantly related to student performance in English and Math (Jenks and Jenks, 2019). English students performed better in more fluid, dynamic classrooms with flexible movable furniture, while math students performed worse in a similar environment. The exact opposite was true for classrooms with static desks in classic rows. The hypothesis was we may be able to find similar actionable results across modalities.

It was clear from the outset that we were not going to be able to analyze modalities in a vacuum or attribute any successes solely to directing learners into them with targeted support. Retention initiatives go beyond just adding another student service here and there within the college, to a more comprehensive approach that will create a collaborative educational environment that promotes the academic success of all students (Tinto, 1999). The reality in higher education is that we have a good sense of what we can do to improve student success and many universities are making improvements in those areas: advising, mental health counseling, engagement in the classroom and on campus, making personnel connections, reducing cost, expanding financial aid services, etc. Student engagement with faculty, peers, and the college community through deliberate institutional action is critical to a student's college life and success (Schultheis, 2015). None of these are surprising to anyone who has worked in student success over the last decade. Modality, however, is not seen as one of the universal variables at many universities, even those that emphasize quality design and delivery. Online coursework has expanded exponentially since the pandemic and certainly over the last two decades, and we need to be cognizant of learning patterns and preferences of today's learners.

Student Success

Middle Georgia State University realized significant gains in student success metrics since summer 2021 which can be seen in Table 1, when there was a renewed push to analyze data, identify opportunities, and reallocate resources to areas we often refer to as 'low hanging fruit'. Of significant note is our deliberate efforts to engage and empower faculty. Working toward student success alongside an empowered faculty builds engagement and maintains momentum. Forcing faculty to teach in modalities they do not enjoy or see their strengths

realized hurts student success. Similarly, failing to provide faculty support for development and improvement can be barriers.

Table 1: MGA Student Success by the Numbers Summer 2021- Spring 2023

	Spring 21	Fall 21	Spring 22	Fall 22	Spring 23
Retention (IPEDS)		56.8%		61.8% **(+5%)**	
Persistence	73.9%		80.1% **(+6%)**		84.1% **(+4%)**
Learning Support English	49.7%	58.1%	52.8% **(+3.1%)**	59.5% **(+1.4%)**	

Persistence defined as reregistration rates from Fall to Spring, was the first metric we intentionally attempted to affect. We addressed this issue through several avenues that included more intrusive centralized advising, a personal call to faculty to connect with one more student in every class, and an analysis of scheduling and instructional modality that resulted in a more deliberate schedule of classes in the second semester to maximize interest and successful completion. The results were clearly a success as fall to spring persistence in the first year increased by 6.2 percentage points. In addition to our overall increases, the deliberate scheduling of students into specific modalities positive impacted our developmental English and math pass rates (+3.1% for spring and 1.4% for fall) for a student population that is traditionally higher at-risk to be retained. These efforts were complemented by some of the additional tried and true strategies such as the use of early alerts, supplemental instruction, pushes to increase social engagement, and the use of financial gap funding. While we celebrated the accomplishment, this also created some hesitance on our part to say we found a 'secret sauce' and the trendline would continue. We were able to replicate our success the following year, mainly through an expansion of efforts from the prior fall.

We are excited that our efforts to increase persistence contributed to a one-year increase of 5 percentage points on our first-time full-time freshmen. It is quite difficult to increase retention effectively by more than a percentage or two in institutions our size. It is also quite difficult to maintain that success without continual and deliberate action at the institution.

We continue to engage faculty on modality analysis as we expand engagement activities across divisions to build campus identity and presence. Our continued efforts of addressing the 'low hanging fruit' and reallocating resources drove us to expand advising which reduced their average load of advisees by 20%, increase supplemental instruction, build a residence life academic support program, and more. Once again, we face the future of our gains with trepidation. We are confident in our process, our faculty, and our upward trendline which has contributed to our enrollment rebound following the pandemic.

Conclusion

Modality analysis is critical in moving the needle in student success going forward. We need to understand that faculty and staff have a greater ability to succeed based on modality and that not all are adept across modalities. Student success cannot be done with one singular strategy. We also must be willing to find ways that move the needle in student success at our institutions and move away from those that do not. Through this work it is important that all are willing to accept the knowledge and experience gained by failing and supporting areas of success.

We have not achieved our overall retention and graduation rate goals. We still have lots of growth and opportunity. With continued effort, student success will continue to improve at Middle Georgia State University, and we hope our nudge to include modality in the analysis is helpful.

Sources

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