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Navigating the Numbers: How Mercy University Used PDP Insights to Lower Barriers for Returning Students Post-COVID

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Mercy University in New York City is a private nonprofit university. It serves a student population of about 6,400 undergraduate students and 2,300 graduate students online and across three campuses in the Greater New York City area. Ninety-six percent of students are from the Tri-state area. The University is a minority-serving institution and the largest private Hispanic-serving institution in the state of New York. Nearly 75% of the incoming freshman class is Pell-eligible, with many balancing family responsibilities and jobs while trying to complete their degree.

Why Mercy University Chose to Participate in the PDP

Mercy University participated in the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) Postsecondary Data Partnership (PDP) as part of an institutional refocus on data and data-driven decision-making. Mercy personnel were drawn to the benchmarking capabilities, the additional metrics provided, and the built-in dashboards.

One of Mercy University's interests in PDP's benchmarking capabilities was to allow for more meaningful comparisons with similar institutions. As an urban-serving, nonprofit private institution that draws a diverse student population, Mercy cannot often find comparable institutions for benchmarking purposes. The PDP offered an opportunity to compare Mercy University against a wider range of institutions, including those within the same state, HBCUs (Historically Black Colleges and Universities), HSIs (Hispanic-Serving Institutions), and others. This capability was seen as crucial to understanding Mercy's competitive position and performance.

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The PDP promised access to a richer array of metrics than Mercy's existing reporting infrastructure could provide. In particular, Mercy was interested in the opportunity to analyze data on credit completion, gateway-course completion, part-time students, and transfer students. These groups and areas are often missing in national datasets. As Matt Presser, Ed.L.D., the Assistant Vice President of Institutional Research and Innovation at Mercy University, commented, "We think there's real value here to shine a light on metrics and benchmarks that we otherwise would not be able to access."

The institution was also attracted to the PDP's built-in dashboards. Mercy believed the dashboards would allow the institution to gain additional insights into its student population beyond Mercy's existing reporting capabilities.



Initial Load and First View

Mercy signed up with the PDP in early 2020. At that time, they were wrestling with data submission, staffing changes, and COVID; they finally completed their first data load in Fall 2021. After completing and validating their data load Mercy began investigating the PDP's dashboards. Initially, the Institutional Research (IR) team found the number of dashboards and filters overwhelming. "It's clear that there is so much good data in there; the challenge was to be able to surface the most powerful insights," Dr. Presser said. To help gain a better understanding of the dashboards and filters, Kelly Colby, M.S., the department's Lead Data Analyst, set up a "Data Day."

“Data Day”

"Data Day" was an opportunity for members of the Institutional Research team to explore the various dashboards and filters provided by the PDP. Each team member focused on different dashboards and employed a range of filters to investigate underlying patterns and insights that might not be immediately apparent. This exploratory approach was aimed at thoroughly understanding the capabilities of the PDP tool and identifying the most valuable data points that could inform institutional strategies and decisions.

A key finding from "Data Day" for Mercy University was the identification of subpopulations that were most impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Like most institutions, Mercy had an increase in stop-outs during the pandemic. During "Data Day," one of the staff focused on the persistence dashboards. The PDP helped Mercy's staff see the differences in persistence and, through the use of filters, shed light on populations that were disproportionately impacted. This became the starting point for further investigation into the factors that impacted persistence and was the impetus for further actions.

"Data Day," and the resulting findings, helped Mercy integrate the PDP into its data infrastructure. Like most institutions, Mercy has access to a wide range of information, both internal and external to the institution. Internal information can include Student Information Systems (SIS), Enterprise Resource Management Systems, Customer Relationship Management Systems, Course Management Systems, Data Warehousing, Business Intelligence, Reporting Systems, and a host of others. External information can include various data systems, such as IPEDS or NSC's StudentTracker. No system can do everything. As stated by Kelly Colby, "The PDP has this. We have this. Where do we want to use the PDP, and where do we want to use our own resources? How do we share this with others?"

Similar to other institutions, Mercy needed to build its own data infrastructure to meet its own needs and context. The PDP has become part of Mercy's data infrastructure, providing learner insights that Mercy was unable to get from other sources.

The Task Force

Dr. Presser brought the findings from Data Day to the Mercy University President's Council, which then commissioned a cross-functional task force to investigate the issues leading to the increase in stop-outs and find a resolution. The task force was made up of decision-makers, midlevel staff, and faculty from the following groups.

Academic Advising Office: Advisors play a crucial role in student retention by providing academic guidance, support, and intervention.

Registrar's Office: The Registrar handles enrollment, maintains academic records, and is critical in re-enrolling students and adjusting their academic status.

Credits and Articulations Team through Admissions: This group assesses transfer credits and articulation agreements, which is essential for students who may have earned credits elsewhere during their break in enrollment.

Institutional Research: IR provides data and analysis to identify trends and outcomes of re-engagement efforts. **Tutoring Office:** Tutoring offers support services for returning students to help them catch up and succeed academically.

Financial Aid: Financial aid provides information on available financial support and guidance on navigating financial aid for returning students.

Center for Teaching and Learning: Representing the faculty perspective and instructional support, this group ensures academic policies and procedures are conducive to re-engaging students.

The task force met regularly to identify impacted students, trying to find resolutions and working to re-engage students with Mercy University. Early in the process, it became apparent the task force would need to break into smaller work groups to focus on specific initiatives. Initially, departments and subgroups tried to identify the data by “looking at this spreadsheet of students essentially, and figuring out how we could break it down into different groups, and seeing what we could do to propose some procedure changes that would be friendly to those students,” according to Leighann VanDeBogart, M.A., the director of Mercy’s PACT advising program.

Based on inspiration from the PDP and discussions in the smaller workgroups, a plan was created. IR was able to provide institutional dashboards and useful data that could be combined with information from other administrative systems and Student Tracker information to understand more fully the barriers students faced.

The task force was also a valuable staff development tool. It provided opportunities for the staff who participated to learn “what each one of us does every single day to try to piece together the puzzle to put the student back together,” according to Leighann VanDeBogart.



Barriers to Returning

Several barriers were identified that prevented stopped-out students from returning. The barriers included financial, readmission requirements, and academic issues. These were identified as barriers the institution could influence.

The financial barriers students faced were related to financial aid or the need for additional funding to continue their studies. Because these barriers were specific to an individual, they were addressed on an individual, case-by-case basis.

For the other barriers, readmission and academic renewal, the task force was able to address them systematically through policy-change proposals. Due to the groundwork by the task force and the composition of the task force, proposals for changes to readmission and academic renewal policies were promptly approved.

The policy for readmission addressed the amount of time a student can be away from the institution before having to reapply for admission. As part of the review process, Mercy University extended its readmission policy from three terms to 2 full years. Further, Mercy developed a new electronic form for readmission that prepopulates it with the last known information for the student. It only asks for updates, which simplifies the process and reduces the burden on a returning student.

The academic renewal policy, referred to as FreshStart by Mercy, allows a student to suppress up to 30 credits of grades after a 5-year absence. Given the challenges many students faced academically during the pandemic, this was realigned to match the readmission timeline.



Contacting Students

With the new policies in place and plans to help students address financial barriers, advising started contacting students to get them to re-enroll. Advisors used existing advising notes for the student, student-specific financial aid information, and the revised policies to re-engage students with the institution. As a result of these efforts, a couple of dozen students returned to Mercy; they would not have had an avenue back if the new policies had not been enacted. This reduced by half a gap that had arisen between this cohort's retention rates and those of their predecessors for the previous few years.



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Conclusion

Although there were challenges during the initial implementation, the PDP provided several benefits to Mercy University. It specifically provided insights necessary to help the institution change policies and practices that were barriers to students who were interested in returning after stopping out. Additionally, the PDP provided Mercy University with data on credit completion, persistence, gateway-course completion, part-time students, and transfer students enhancing student outcomes. Insights from the PDP have also been used to inform and enhance the institution's data warehousing and reporting structure. Lastly, the PDP provided Mercy University with the opportunity to benchmark against other institutions. The current benchmarking is useful, but the institution is looking forward to a time when more institutions participate in the PDP, allowing for more robust benchmarking.