CASE STUDY

NATIONAL LOUIS UNIVERSITY

How to Close the Degree Attainment Gap? Data, Dedication and Collaboration

What is Pathways?

Pathways is a four-year nonresidential undergraduate program within the Undergraduate College at National Louis University (NLU), a nonprofit, nondenominational university offering bachelor's, master's and doctoral degrees in the fields of education management, human services, counseling, public policy, culinary arts, hospitality and others concerned with career and professional development.

Launched in 2015, Pathways offers a professionally focused, supportive, flexible, affordable path to a degree for underserved students. The vision of Pathways is to close the opportunity gap in bachelor's degree attainment for low-income students. Students served in 2017-18:

- Were 82 percent Pell grant eligible.
- Were 82 percent first-generation college students.
- Were 70 percent Latinx, and 24 percent African-American.
- Earned an average ACT score of 17, and average high school GPA of 2.7.

Pathways has several unique characteristics designed to expand access to this student population:

- $10,000 annual tuition before financial aid, which can mean zero out-of-pocket expense for students qualifying for full federal and state aid.
- A streamlined admissions process with a 2.0 GPA or higher admissions requirement.
- Schedule flexibility, consistency and dependability (students attend classes two days a week on-campus and complete the remainder of coursework online).
- Personalized, flipped, adaptive instructional model leveraging technology and small class sizes to differentiate support for every student.
- Clear and well-rounded pathway to a degree.
- Embedded career preparation through required curriculum, work-based learning, and career coaching.
- High-touch, supportive environment, with a success coach for every student and cohorted teams of instructors and staff who collaborate, informed by data, to focus on each student.

Data-Driven Student Success: A Case Study from the First Three Years of National Louis University's Pathways Program

Incorporating data effectively into higher education is a tricky business. Schools can be so beguiled by the technology they're introducing—or so overwhelmed by the amount of data the technology generates—that they miss the human stories the data is telling.

Since 2015, National Louis University (NLU), which serves more than 8,000 students at locations in Illinois and Florida, has been using real-time student data to drive growth and improvement in an innovative new model that expands access to students who have been underserved historically. The model, Pathways at NLU, is a four-year program that aims to close the degree attainment gap for traditional-age students who are low-income, often the first in their family to attend college, and predominantly underrepresented minorities.

This population faces significant barriers to accessing and persisting in degree programs. They often have full-time jobs with irregular schedules as well as family care responsibilities. As first generation college-goers, they also don't often have access to academic and career guidance in their personal networks to help them to make steady progress toward degree completion and gain meaningful employment after graduation.

To offer a "student-ready" degree option that meets the needs of these students, Pathways relies heavily on qualitative and quantitative data from a variety of sources; but the program isn't centered on the data itself. Instead, Pathways is designed to enable data-driven and personalized early interventions. Data supports faculty and staff as they determine how to help students succeed.

"A student's trajectory through college is complex," says Tracy Templin, director of undergraduate analytics and strategic initiatives for Pathways at NLU. "It's important to bring data into the conversation in order to understand students' issues and resolve them quickly and effectively."

Pathways' first freshman class started in 2015-2016, and persistence and achievement data from the first three years proved to be promising.

Pathways uses GPA to indicate "on track to graduate"—2.33 for first-year students and 2.5 for sophomores. In the first cohort, 60 percent of first-year students met the on-track-to-graduate standard. In the 2017-2018 cohort, 76 percent finished the year above that standard.

The retention rate between years one and two for the first two cohorts was 70 percent, outperforming the 53 percent persistence rate for Chicago students with a similar academic profile at other institutions.[1]

Similarly, the on-track rate has improved for sophomores from 68 percent to 79 percent.

[1]Chicago Public Schools. (2015). *2015 District College Persistence Summary*. Retrieved from Chicago Public Schools Website: https://cps.edu/Performance/Documents/Datafiles/SY15_College_Persistence.pdf

How Data Is Used in Pathways

1. To directly support student performance

Real-time data is generated by faculty grade books, student activity and coaches' notes. Faculty and staff review that information in weekly Student Success Collaboration meetings, instructors use it to plan classroom activities and coaches use it to inform one-on-one meetings with students.

Often, when a student is in danger of failing, data pushes that student onto an instructor's radar. If, for example, a student hasn't logged in to a course for 72 hours, their profile shows them as inactive, and instructors can target that student for outreach.

2. To support faculty and staff

Pathways creates weekly reports for instructors to help them review student performance and to inform their own class planning.

In the fall of 2016, when Pathways introduced its first philosophy course, weekly reports showed that by week four, the average grades were alarmingly low. Instructors dove into the data and discovered that assignments in the online courseware didn't align with what students were doing in class.

Normally, that wouldn't have become apparent until after final exams and could only be addressed the next time the course was offered. Instead, this real-time insight prompted Pathways to make immediate adjustments to better align the instruction, homework material and assessments. At the end of the term, says Templin, 80 percent of the students received a C or better in that course.

3. To support continuous program improvement

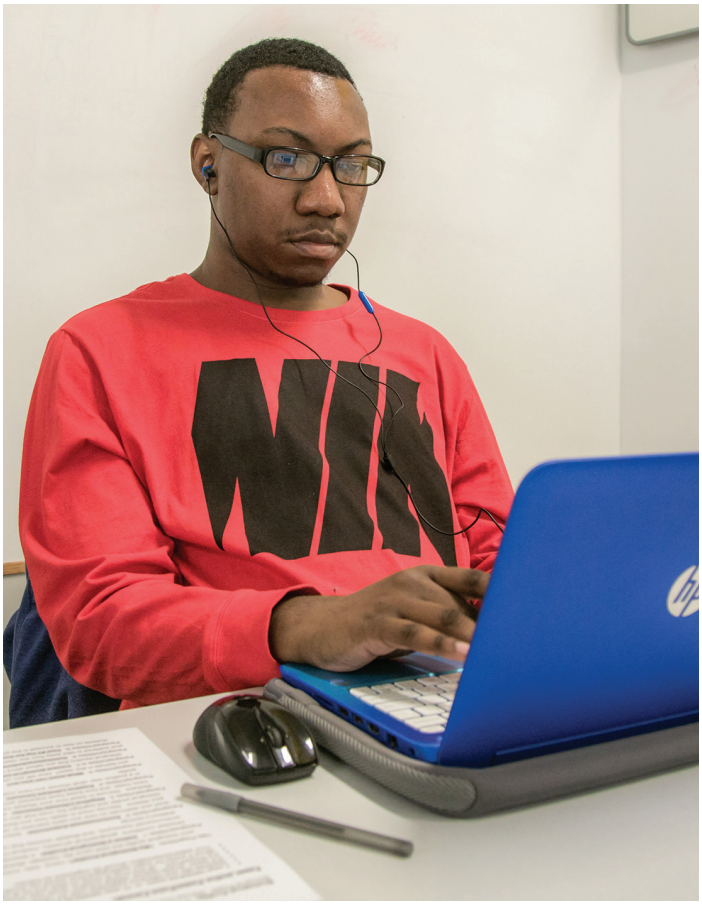
Pathways uses student performance and programmatic data to identify trends and adjust the program.

For example, in the first year, many students struggled in the winter term, says Templin. After looking at the data, the Pathways team shifted course sequences so students had a more balanced workload across the fall and winter courses. Similarly, the introductory science class, because it utilizes extensive foreign-language vocabulary, was moved back to sophomore year to follow a full-year of intensive English coursework in freshman year.

Another program-level innovation came after trends revealed that African-American males were not persisting at the rate of other groups of students. Pathways began developing a male retention initiative in 2017-2018. The peer support program for young men of color—the Eagle Brotherhood, named for the NLU mascot—is designed to improve the persistence and achievement metrics for this segment of the student population.

The program has also been scaling up dramatically. The first freshman class enrolled 85 students. In fall 2018, enrollment for the fourth incoming group of freshmen was over 600 students. The total student population in school year 2018-19, inclusive of freshmen through seniors, is projected to be 1,200.

In other words, in four years, NLU has established a new undergraduate student body the size of a small college, made up entirely of traditional-age students who have significant academic, financial and/or personal challenges but who are exceeding results of their peers in traditional programs. The university's goal is to close the degree attainment gap in the Chicago area, with Pathways growing to over 2,000 students by 2023.



A program built on data and empathy

In Pathways, every student is assigned a success coach who meets with the student at least twice a year and provides academic advising, social and emotional support and career coaching.

Because students often have jobs and support families, classes meet twice a week. Students complete assignments online using adaptive courseware and e-textbooks. Those online activities generate learning data that is continuously updated to each student's profile.

That data informs nearly every class meeting, as well as weekly Student Success Collaboration (SSC) meetings comprised of instructors, coaches and academic specialists who are responsible for a cohort of students. When the data suggests a potential problem for an individual student, an intervention is planned.

Not all interventions are about challenges, though. When the data indicates a student is improving or excelling, the team can also plan a positive "high five", a congratulatory email or text message, to reinforce the student's strengths and to help them maintain that effort.

Data can flatten classroom walls

Student data is most often used by instructors to identify students at risk of struggling. That prompts faculty or success coaches to connect with students, where they usually uncover unique challenges — root causes — requiring unique solutions.

For example, Templin tells of a sophomore in 2017 who had started strong but whose A and B grades began to slip. When the success coach followed up, they discovered that the student had a complex web of unstable housing and employment challenges. The coach worked with the student to find new housing and a new job with a better schedule that would allow the student to maintain focus on school.

And when Jon Oelke, a psychology professor at Pathways, noticed a student struggling in his course, he looked at the student's profile and saw the student was having a hard time in every other subject except math, which they were thriving in.

"That was unusual," Oelke says. "Students tend to do well in other classes and struggle with math."

Supporting Faculty Learning, Generating Faculty Enthusiasm

NLU employs both full-time faculty and part-time adjunct faculty. While the Pathways philosophy poses a learning curve for all instructors, the data-centric and team-based approach at NLU can be particularly challenging for part-time instructors. They are likely to also teach at other colleges where they may not have access to student data or might not be accustomed to collaborating so closely with colleagues.

Also, both full- and part-time instructors in some fields are not as familiar with using statistics in their day-to-day work. Being asked to interpret student data every week can be intimidating, says Jon Oelke, a psychology professor who manages a team of Pathways instructors.

He's found a few ways of making this learning curve easier for everyone involved.

Use graphs and other visualizations

Rather than expecting professors to sort and interpret raw data, NLU's analytics team produces charts and graphs to communicate student data. They find that visual representations of data are less intimidating than a spreadsheet.

Using student data to share what works

Oelke helps instructors build on strengths revealed by the data. He looks for instructors of courses with consistently high quiz scores and pairs them with instructors whose quiz scores are lower. These collaborations help spread best practices throughout the team.

Some best practices are related to classroom management. These may be as simple as instructors having seating plans that work well for their subject material. But often these best practices involve knowing how and when to intervene with students—such as when to send a student to writing support services.

Let in more sunlight

Oelke had been meeting regularly with instructors to discuss student data but he found that adjunct faculty seemed self-conscious in these meetings. He eventually determined that they felt the meetings were performance reviews.

The intention of these meetings, however, is to enable more collaboration, so facilitation and leadership are key. Oelke began to give adjuncts access to the whole team's student data at all times so they can easily see the information they will review in advance. Making that data transparent and accessible helps instructors understand that reviewing data is about improving student performance, which encourages more participation.

Keep adjusting

The tools that Pathways relies on are constantly being refined. For example, an automatic upload of data from instructors' gradebooks and online courseware was introduced during the second year of the program. Previously, instructors were required to input their information manually.

This change was received enthusiastically: Student information is now always up to date, and instructors have more time to focus on higher-order tasks like student outreach and instructional planning.

"Faculty and staff went from inputting data to interpreting data," says Oelke.

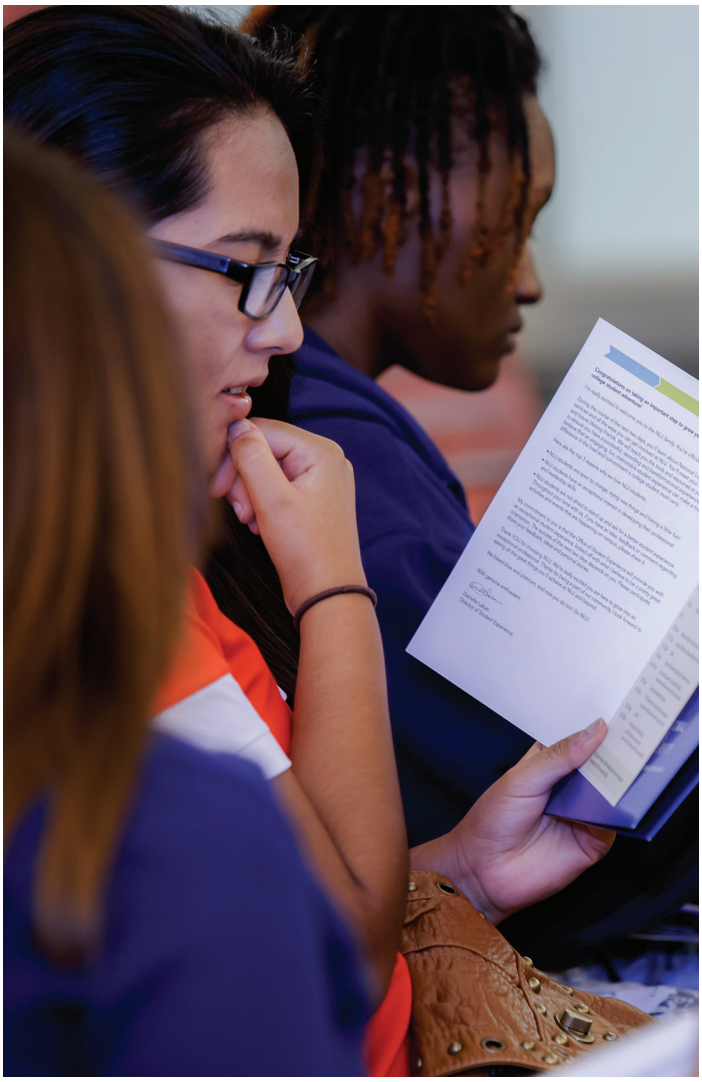
Armed with this information, Oelke went to the math instructor and the success coach to find out why math was the standout subject for this student. What he discovered was a history of intensive math instruction. The student wasn't naturally good at math; they had just worked diligently at it when they were younger.

"I approached the student and we had a conversation about how they weren't originally 'good at math' but they worked really hard at it, and psychology is going to be similar," says Oelke. "Like math, it is a skill they can develop."

Without the data and collaboration with other instructors and the success coach, Oelke would not have been able to look outside the walls of his classroom and see the long view of his student's academic career.

This strength-based approach to struggling students is one instructors use often. Even if a student isn't doing well in any classes, Oelke can use student data to see which classes they're showing up for.

"They're interested in that material," he says. "Maybe I can use topics from that class to draw them in."



6 Key Elements for Data-Driven Student Success

1. Set your goals

Knowing what you want your students to achieve gives you a landmark to navigate toward when designing how you will use data to support student success.

2. Choose your technology strategically

There is a lot of education technology out there. Some tools make a great impression, and some tools support your goals — but they're not necessarily the same tools. Keep focused on data that helps you answer the questions that are important to your program.

3. Get buy-in from all stakeholders

More than the data, the culture of support in Pathways makes student success possible. Make sure your process doesn't just burden faculty with more to do without helping them work more effectively with students in the long run.

4. Continuously provide regular support for faculty

Building a data-savvy culture and creating the conditions for providing high-support to students may involve fundamentally changing how some people work. To create conditions for success, develop an onboarding process for faculty before enrollment even starts. Then make training an ongoing part of the program.

5. Develop best practices for faculty and staff

Documenting procedures and interventions and providing continuous training keeps faculty and staff from reinventing the wheel every time a student struggles.

6. Be open to change

The data will often point to changes a program should consider. Be open to continuous innovation and improvement.

Data can flatten organizational silos

Even with access to data, sometimes an individual instructor might not see the red flags until the SSC looks at that data together. Data enables a holistic view of individual students and a collaborative approach to problem solving.

For example, Templin tells of a student who came to the attention of the SSC early in their junior year as they began courses in their human services/psychology major. The student had excelled in the first two years, but the data now indicated they were struggling.

In team meetings, faculty realized the common denominator across all the student's courses was weakness on their writing assignments. They believed the transition to more technical writing in their major subject may have been the source of the new problems. The success coach then worked to connect the student with writing support services on campus.

In another case, Martin Caver, an assistant professor of history, says he had a student who was doing well but then missed two classes. It wasn't enough for Caver to be alarmed about until other faculty noted the same issue in an SSC meeting.

When the student success coach contacted the student, it actually turned out to be good news — up to a point. The student had been promoted to manager at work and was putting in more hours to meet their new responsibilities. The coach and faculty worked out an individual plan with the student until a modified job schedule could be worked out.

"In a lot of other programs, that student would have fallen way too far behind, would not have felt comfortable coming to the professor and would not have been able to mediate an equitable solution that centered around the student and not the professor," says Caver. "That would have been a lot quarter for the student at any other school."

Data enables the long view

Coaches — and the relationship they've built with their students — are a huge piece of Pathways' intervention process. They monitor the students' academic career, and they are the first line of defense if a student starts missing classes.

"I've never met a student who wants to fail," says Aurora Flores Garcia, manager of student success at Pathways. "Their absence from school is usually a sign of being so overwhelmed by circumstances that their habitual response is to retreat."

Coaches can draw on a deep data record including the high school GPA, test scores, all the courses that have been taken at NLU, credits transferred and notes on interventions. That living profile of a student's entire experience at NLU informs one-on-one student meetings with coaches.

This comprehensive understanding of individual students helps coaches support progress over the long term. They speak up on a student's behalf in SSC meetings if instructors are getting frustrated rather than addressing the student's needs.

Flores Garcia relies on her historical data to give instructors context about student challenges. She also uses real-time academic data to keep meetings focused on the root cause of a student's issue rather than symptoms like absences or late work.

While every student intervention is different, data provides coaches some obvious areas to watch for trouble. For example, they pull attendance data the second week of classes to identify students who've missed their first classes. They use midterm grades to find out which students need additional academic or emotional support.

Data makes the university personal

Data also informs the method of outreach. Unless a student has no mobile phone, texting is the preferred method of making contact because texts have the highest response rate.

That strategy may seem radical to advisors at other schools. Recently, a colleague at a professional conference told Flores Garcia that texting students seemed like "going down a rabbit hole."

But to Flores Garcia, texting just makes sense. Changing the way advising is done might not appear to be the most obvious route to those who don't have student data in front of them, but once you do have it, the best path is often clear.

"If we continue to interpret the role of advising and coaching as happening separately from the student's in-class experience or from their personal lives, we will miss the mark on their success," she says. "We will reinforce the silos that already exist in institutions of higher education."

Most educators welcome a window into the personal and academic factors that contribute to a student starting strong before dropping out. Data provides that window. Data is not the end result of educational technology; it's a powerful tool that educators can use to reveal patterns in student performance and behavior so they can personalize teaching and advising.

Raw data by itself isn't enough to make a difference; the most effective programs have systems in place that allow educators to examine the data, interpret it and use it. They have documentation and best practices for identifying what's important and for working together to provide meaningful interventions.

The Pathways program works in a coordinated way to ensure faculty members aren't working in isolation. Without the SSC, a well-meaning instructor armed with good data would have far less impact.

Take the example of the student who'd been promoted to manager and who was suddenly missing most of their classes. Even if one instructor did sense a problem and reached out to the student to help, any support that one instructor might have offered would not have extended to the student's other classes. The intervention would have been random rather than coordinated, and the student would have slipped through the cracks.

"It's just not enough to implement a tool or to pull the data," says Templin. "It really is those conversations with the team and students that leads to changing behaviors."

NATIONAL LOUIS UNIVERSITY

1886

Written by A.J. O'Connell and McGuire Editorial Content Marketing Agency. Design by Creative Concepts, Inc.

About National Louis University

National Louis, a nonprofit, nondenominational university, offers bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees in the fields of education, management, human services, counseling, public policy, culinary arts, hospitality and others concerned with career and professional development. National Louis' roots date back to 1886 when it first began providing educational access to adult, immigrant and minority populations. Our mission is to provide innovative and superior and supportive educational experience for students of all ages and backgrounds, and we are committed to the preparation of professionals who serve their communities. Serving more than 8,000 students at locations in Illinois and Florida, we are proud of our alumni who are using their education to serve others. Learn more at **www.NL.edu**.

For more information about Pathways at National Louis University, contact Tracy Templin, Director of Undergraduate Analytics and Strategic Initiatives at ttemplin1@nl.edu.