

The Succeed at La Trobe Program: A University-Wide Early Intervention and Developmental Advising Initiative

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Abstract

The Succeed at La Trobe Program is a central part of La Trobe's Student Success and Retention Strategy. In 2016 the program was made a University-wide strategic priority that sought to combine a number of evidence-based success and retention interventions into a more singular coordinated effort. These include: (1) a newly established professional student contact centre for the purpose of conducting proactive early interventions with students believed to be 'at-risk'; (2) an emerging learning analytics program for the early identification of students 'at-risk' of academic disengagement, failure, and/or attrition; and (3) the creation of a new Student Developmental Advising initiative to provide one-to-one advising to students, but particularly those believed to be 'at-risk'. This Emerging Initiative session outlines the operational challenges and limitations encountered in the implementation of the program while also sharing key insights that may be applicable across institutions involved in similar initiatives.

Introduction

La Trobe University's *Future Ready Strategic Plan 2013-2017* has set the ambitious goal of achieving "top 12" standing, for all relevant fields of education (FOEs), in relation to national rankings in student success, retention and satisfaction. To meet this challenge, La Trobe's *Student Success and Retention Strategy: A Whole of Institution Approach 2016* was designed to instantiate a full suite of goals and strategies that would bring greater coherence and consistency to the University's efforts in relation to student success and retention. A central initiative within this larger strategy has been *The Succeed at La Trobe Program*. This emerging initiative seeks to combine a number of evidence-based success and retention interventions into a single coordinated initiative, including: (1) a newly established professional student contact centre for the purpose of conducting proactive early interventions with students believed to be "at-risk"; (2) an emerging learning analytics program for the early identification of students "at-risk" of academic disengagement, failure, and/or attrition; and (3) the creation of a new Student Developmental Advising initiative to provide one-to-one advising to students, but particularly those believed to be "at-risk". In this Emerging Initiatives paper we detail the rationale underpinning the evolution of *The Succeed at La Trobe Program* and we further discuss the many operational challenges and decisions that were negotiated throughout the program's ongoing implementation.

Program Development and Institutional Context

Succeed at La Trobe Proactive Early Intervention Call Centre

The *Succeed at La Trobe Program* originated in 2012 as a small-scale proactive early intervention outreach program aimed at establishing personalised phone-based contact with commencing students. Phone-based proactive outreach efforts such as these have been shown to have significant positive outcomes towards improving student success and retention: 44% to 22% reduction in student “dropout” (Chyung, 2001); 5% increase in retention (Simpson, 2006); and significantly higher success/pass rates in targeted subjects (Nelson, Duncan, & Clarke, 2009).

As the program grew to become a University-wide “strategic project” in 2016, we were faced with the pragmatic challenge of effectively targeting our limited resources to those students who were most likely to benefit from the interventions. To achieve this, we targeted select first-year subjects with tailored campaigns employing a combination of demographically selected cohorts and students identified through behavioural (academic) indicators. The behavioural “triggers” included a number of proxy indicators for student disengagement, including class absenteeism (Hudson, 2005), failure to login to University email systems, and low or no use of the learning management system (Leah P. Macfadyen & Dawson, 2010). The program also sought to monitor early indicators of academic failure including the failure or non-submission of individual assessment tasks (Nelson et al., 2009).

Early warning and intervention programs, like the *Succeed at La Trobe Program*, must grapple with the difficult challenge of balancing the pragmatics of institutional organization and culture while also remaining informed and directed by the evidence described in the research literature. In this Emerging Initiative presentation we focus on two particularly challenging decisions that all Universities with similar early intervention programs must confront.

First, we focus on the question raised by Simpson (2004), when he asks “who is the best person to undertake the contact?” (p. 86). The earliest iterations of the *Succeed at La Trobe Program* relied on trained undergraduate students, like the program described by Nelson et al. (2009), to conduct the phone calls in their capacity as a trained peer-advisers. Another option, as described by Simpson (2004, 2006), is to employ the student’s individual tutors to carryout the proactive contacts. In 2016 the decision was made to move the *Succeed at La Trobe* call-centre into our existing professionally staffed in-bound University call-centre. The program now operates through a “central” team of highly trained professional staff who are partially embedded within our Student Academic Services area. We believe there are many benefits to be gained from this approach, but we also understand what might be lost due to the exclusion of peer-advisers in this particular program.

Secondly, we ask: what is the most effective way to proactively engage a student while avoiding the risks of unintentionally instigating in the student a counter-productive academic mindset. When conducting proactive outreach to students who have “triggered” an academic early warning indicator, one of two broad approaches may be adopted. The adviser may wish to 1) sensitively, but forthrightly, declare the reason for the proactive contact – i.e. the student has failed an assignment – or they may choose to 2) characterise the contact as a general “checking-in” call and hope that the student will self-declare any challenges they are facing in their studies. At present, *Succeed at La Trobe* advisers always sensitively declare the purpose and reason for the call while

keeping in mind the risk of triggering “deficit thinking” (Valencia, 2010), “fixed mindsets” (Yeager & Dweck, 2012), or “stereotype threat” (Taylor & Walton, 2011).

Learning Analytics and Automating the Early Identification of At-Risk Students

As the *Succeed at La Trobe Program* grew in scale and moved to a fully in-house operation, it also began to demand much greater data collection and data analysis capabilities. While the earliest iteration of the program relied on a small set of academic early indicators, the new University-wide program would require a much more sophisticated program of learning (or *learner*) analytics. La Trobe’s *Digital Learning Strategy 2015-2016*, contained within it a work stream dedicated to the development of greater learning analytics capabilities for the University community, but particularly to meet the needs of the *Succeed at La Trobe Program*. In 2016, the La Trobe *Learning Analytics Project* was also named a University-wide “strategic project” as part of the *Future Ready Strategic Plan*. While the project remains a work in progress, it promises to enhance the power, reach, and efficiency of the *Succeed at La Trobe Program* by building in-house capabilities relating to the early identification of students at-risk of attrition or academic failure through the automated analysis of student behaviours and performance within the LMS and other student systems. Numerous studies have shown that this approach can be effective in the early identification of students at-risk and further inform the kinds of interventions that would be effective based on the analysis of the available data (Arnold & Pistilli, 2012; Wright, McKay, Hershock, Miller, & Tritz, 2014).

It has been widely recognised that an accurate and timely data picture of student progress and engagement is a necessary, although not sufficient, pillar within any academic early warning and intervention system. The data picture that emerges from an institution’s analytics systems is useless, and perhaps unethical, if trained professionals cannot act upon it in a timely and effective manner (Macfadyen & Dawson, 2012).

The Student Development Adviser Program

Like the two earlier initiatives that also fall under the *Succeed at La Trobe Program* banner, in March 2016, La Trobe approved the implementation of a new strategic success and retention project called the *Student Developmental Adviser Program*. Unlike earlier advising initiatives at La Trobe University involving academic staff (Stephenson, 2012), the SDA program employs highly trained professional staff advisers. The SDA Program is a completely new initiative that launched in semester 2 of 2016. The program is delivered through La Trobe’s College-based STAR teams in partnership with the “central” La Trobe Learning and Teaching teams. The Student Developmental Adviser team is composed of 6 Full Time Equivalent (FTE) professional staff employed at the Higher Education Officer (HEO) 7 level.

La Trobe’s Student Developmental Advisers have been trained in the traditions of “developmental” (Broadbridge, 1996; Crookston, 1972), “appreciative” (Bloom, Hutson, & He, 2008; Hutson, 2010), and “engagement” (Yarbrough, 2002) advising and are not involved in “transactional” (Shin, 2002) advising relating to general course or procedural advice. The SDA program will contribute to LTU’s student success and retention strategy by providing proactive and high quality advice to students that is developmental in nature and is aimed at supporting students in identifying and meeting

their personal educational goals. The program is intended to ensure the provision of student advice and support to students at all stages of the student lifecycle, facilitating independence and self-direction, improving student engagement, and promoting increased success and retention outcomes (Drake, 2011). The program will provide one-on-one developmental advising appointments to all students, with a specific focus on first year undergraduate students who are identified as ‘at-risk’ through the *Succeed at La Trobe Program* and its evolving learning analytics capabilities.

Challenges

This Emerging Initiative has relied on several critical dependencies including: the development of greater learning analytics capabilities to identify students at-risk of disengagement, failure and early withdrawal from their course. The program has also encountered challenges relating to availability of accurate data extracts that would enable the generation of student contact lists. Timely access to the required data, and data reliability, has been a constant challenge throughout the early program implementation. Finally, the program has also relied on the creation of a fit-for-purpose Customer Relationship Management (CRM) solution to record student interactions, provide automated reports, book student appointments, and effectively ‘close the data loop’. This single CRM solution currently remains an unrealized University project thereby requiring the creation of several temporary workaround solutions.

Questions for Discussion

1. Is your institution also working to combine proactive outreach to ‘at-risk’ students, with the help of learning analytics, and a more personalised academic advising service?
2. For Universities with a proactive outreach centre, have you opted to utilise students or professional staff for making contact with students? What is lost or gained by your approach?
3. Does your University have a consistent and institution-wide approach to personalised academic advising? Is it based on something like a “developmental” model? Do you employ students, professional staff or academic staff to provide advisory services to students?
4. What is your institution’s experience with learning analytics and predictive modeling of student risk profiles? Are you using demographic indicators as well as monitoring student behaviours? Are you finding that the program is effective?

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