5 Insights About Indian River State College’s Increased Student Success Rate
Since launching its Virtual Campus in 2013, Indian River State College has experienced a 6% increase in student success rates – which are based on student grades, with those who obtain A, B and C scores, or a 70% overall average, being considered successful – for all online courses. The Virtual Campus offers 15 undergraduate degrees, with over 6,000 students enrolled. Kendall St. Hilaire, Virtual Campus assistant dean, and Paul O’Brien, vice-president of Institutional Technology and CIO at Indian River State College, reveal how to achieve a high-quality education and share their plans for the future, particularly regarding learning analytics.

Five years ago, Indian River State College (IRSC) created a Virtual Campus, an online space to leverage new opportunities for flexible, web-based course delivery to benefit both campus-based and off-campus/distance students.

The college has a full-time enrollment of 14,000 students. Over 60% of students receive financial aid, and 70% have part-time jobs for more than 30 hours per week. Balancing school and work make online learning an attractive option for students.

Courses within the Virtual Campus degree programs are created using a consistent format, so students can focus on learning and can easily find the materials they need. Each of the 288 courses available have been designed by experienced IRSC faculty members, and all 15-degree programs are nationally certified through Quality Matters (QM).

The initiative has proven successful, considering the IRSC has seen a 6.1% increase in student success rates for online courses, going from 74% in 2013-14, to 80.1% in 2016-17, as well as an 11% increase in the online baccalaureate success rate.

There are two main reasons for the recent increase in student success rates: The master course model – which guarantees any section of an online course has the same 'look and feel' and syllabi are always found in the same location, among other advantages – as well as the use of learning analytics, since IRSC has a large amount of data that has recently become available to faculty, department chairs, and deans. “They can use this data to see how well students are progressing throughout a semester,” says St. Hilaire.

In addition to that, economically speaking, Indian River State College could not support 30 versions of an English course, one for each of the institution’s English faculty members. They could however, develop one solid course and scale it. This is precisely how the master courses began. “We now have broad acceptance of master course philosophy, but it did take a while for us to get there,” said O’Brien at BbWorld17.
Let’s take a closer look at Indian River State College's actions toward improving the college’s student success ratios.

1. **Blackboard Analytics for Learn** provides deans with “bird’s eye view” reporting that directly impacts student success.

Indian River State College decided to invest in the Blackboard Analytics portfolio because the institution was trying to find new ways to learn about their online students. “Blackboard could provide us information on our students at a much more granular, detailed level than we previously had in our former LMS,” says St. Hilaire.

The Blackboard Analytics for Learn (A4L) reports were meant for the instructional deans to receive insights into what was happening within their division.

“It’s not that deans don’t have the time to jump into every online course or go sit in every face-to-face class to see what is happening in each one of them. Therefore, we created reports for all sections running in his or her division in any given semester,” St. Hilaire explains.

The reports enable them to know what the current grade center score is for every course, which students are performing at a 70% or higher grade, and which ones are performing below this level. “This was a bird’s eye view reporting that our deans have never had before,” the assistant dean says. “These reports are conversation starters. With this information at hand, deans can turn to the faculty members and say, ‘Is there anything I can do to assist you?’” says St. Hilaire.

2. **Blackboard Predict** allows students to get more support earlier in the semester.

Blackboard Predict has also been in use at the institution since 2017 to aid in the increase of student success rates. The tool helped impact recent results as well, especially in the Virtual Campus.

“The implementation of predictive analytics in higher education is a game changer,” believes St. Hilaire. “We chose to invest in Blackboard

Kendall St. Hilaire
Assistant Dean, Virtual Campus, Indian River State College
Predict because it’s a very exciting concept for our institution to have knowledge about a student and the likelihood of their success prior to the beginning of the term,” she adds.

“Blackboard Predict also gives a prediction on the likelihood of a student earning a 70% or higher grade in the class, based on the student’s previous academic history,” says St. Hilaire. But when students begin to interact with instructors and classmates, the prediction can change and adjust. “We appreciate the fact that you can begin the semester with an idea of who might need a closer watch and provide additional support and reinforcements for those particular students before the term even begins,” affirms St. Hilaire.

According to O’Brien, “A lot of times in education, the issue is that you are looking at data after the fact, when you’re powerless to help. At best, you are hoping that you are going to help some future generation by analyzing what happened in the past.”

Blackboard Analytics for Learn opens up the possibility for higher education institutions to take action while a course is still in motion. Blackboard Predict complements this insight by forecasting a student’s chances of success based on past activity. “Predict is the most exciting thing that we are doing right now. We have over 70% accuracy in predicting a student who is likely to be in trouble at week zero in the course,” O’Brien affirms.

3. **Centralized grade center makes students more proactive.**

Indian River State College also works with a centralized grade center, which is run with the Blackboard Grade Center tool. One of the benefits is that students are able to see how they are doing earlier in the semester, compared to when this information was available to them in previous years. “Our students are able to check in and see their progress. Because of this, students are becoming more proactive. By realizing they are not doing well, it is possible to initiate a conversation with faculty,” St. Hilaire explains.

4. **The Virtual Campus master course model is used by faculty in face-to-face classes.**

All 288 Virtual Campus courses are designed around Indian River State College’s master course model, an interface that allows for all courses to have design unity and look and feel like they belong to the same institution. Now, besides receiving quality feedback from students who are satisfied with the master course model, faculty are beginning to use it in their face-to-face classes as well.
5. Short and long-term goals for Indian River State College’s Virtual Campus

As a short-term goal, IRSC is working to increase awareness about analytics. By understanding who is currently using the reports, they can provide access to those on campus that may need to work with analytics but are currently not. “We are trying to make sure that everyone who is in contact with our students and needs to use this data are all communicating with one another,” says St. Hilaire. “A communication plan is really important – we do not want seven people reaching out to one student or overwhelming them with representation from the college trying to make sure they are still doing well in the course.”

As a long-term goal, the assistant dean says she would like to see something regarding prescriptive analytics, with the analytics tool ‘becoming aware’ of what is happening with students, and based on that knowledge, give their advisors a hint about the situation. For example, if a student has not logged in for three days or is doing poorly for some other reason, notifications could be sent to advisors or even to students themselves. “That would free up some of the work that the advisors are doing now in terms of communicating with students, and allow them to do a deeper counseling with additional students,” St. Hilaire comments. These kinds of notifications, at the student level, are already a standard feature in Blackboard Ultra.