

Get Students Across the Finish Line

THE CHALLENGE

Support students near graduation through that final stretch.

THE APPROACH

Create “graduation specialist” positions focused solely on barriers to graduation.

THE RESULT

The university’s four-year graduation rate has risen almost four percentage points since the program started.

WHEN Indiana State University’s retention rate slipped by nearly 6 percentage points in 2010, the institution sharpened its focus on student success. Administrators explored ways to help new students, while considering how to propel more juniors and seniors to the finish. The university’s four-year graduation rate had hovered around 20 percent for at least a decade.

About half of Indiana State’s students are first-generation, and about two-thirds receive financial aid. After examining data and talking with advisers, administrators identified common challenges juniors and seniors were facing, such as scheduling problems and

not being offered. Or students didn’t know where to get help with course planning and felt abandoned.

She encountered pushback at first, she says: “It was hard to get buy-in,” especially from academic advisers, and from faculty members who felt like she was meddling.

The university now employs three graduation specialists, who pore over student records, trying to catch gaps in degree progress or other inconsistencies, and act as a one-stop shop for students’ questions. They also contact students who have left without finishing their degrees.

The specialists cross-train with the university’s financial-aid office. Scholarships

can depend on students’ earning a certain number of credit hours each semester or year, and for students who work, those targets can be difficult to achieve. The specialists are a first contact for students struggling to maintain their scholarships, and the university has reserved aid for students whose credit hours fall just short.

Indiana State’s four-year graduation rate has risen almost four percentage points since 2016, continuing an upward trend in the past several years. While the jump cannot be

attributed solely to the specialists, their role has been an important factor, Powers says.

Cantrell often hears from graduates who may not have earned their degrees without that additional support in the home stretch. “I get lots of emails from students just thanking me for giving them, you know, a little bit of extra time,” she says.



JONATHAN GARCIA, INDIANA STATE U.

Indiana State U. has created a new role, the “graduation specialist,” to help students plan their classes and overcome obstacles to getting a degree.

financial barriers, says Joshua Powers, associate vice president for student success.

Inspired by a program at California State University at Fullerton, Indiana State created a “graduation specialist” role in the 2015-16 academic year. Christina Cantrell, the first one, was quickly able to see a lot of “balls being dropped,” she says, like prerequisites