

Make Advising a Science

THE CHALLENGE

Identify struggling students early.

THE APPROACH

Invest in proactive advising guided by predictive-analytics software.

THE RESULT

The retention rate for first-year students rose seven percentage points over a five-year period, and overall undergraduate retention rose four points.

WHEN Middle Tennessee State University started using predictive-analytics software in 2014, administrators suddenly had a world of data at their fingertips.

That knowledge was as exhilarating as it was daunting. With so much information, the university has had to choose its priorities carefully. "If we don't, we get spread too thin," says Richard Sluder, vice provost for student success.

MTSU has zeroed in on academic advising, investing in a new infrastructure that puts data in the hands of advisers and encourages a proactive approach. Under the old model, "students came to see advisers to get a check-off to register," Sluder says. "The new model is that advisers are making outreach to students and then paying attention when they're off track."

The university invested \$4 million to restructure advising, bringing on 47 new advisers to more than double the staff. A three-year grant covered the cost of the analytics software, though administrators had already budgeted for that expense.

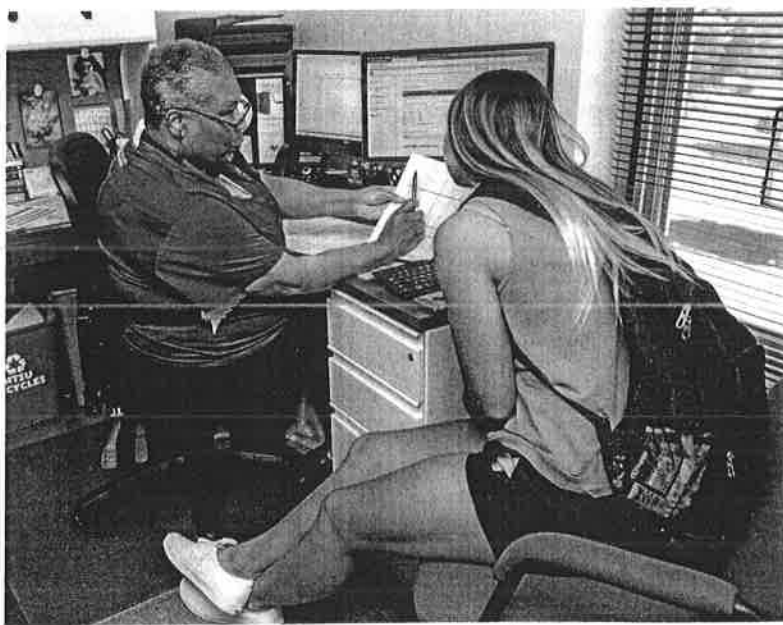
Using the software, advisers in each college flag at-risk students by looking at various factors, including performance in 10 general-education courses found to be predictive of success. About 80 percent of students who receive an A in a survey course on U.S. history, for example, go on to graduate, compared with only

40 percent of students who get a D.

Before the use of predictive analytics, a D student might never have come onto an adviser's radar. Now, if students struggle in a key course, "they're going to be set for an alert for an adviser to pay attention to them," Sluder says.

Advisers reach out to students by email, text, and phone. Other outreach tactics have included outfitting cafeteria workers in T-shirts asking "Have you seen your adviser?" and hosting social events at the various colleges' advising centers.

Each center regularly reports its results. The retention rate for first-year students rose to 76 percent in 2018, up from 69 percent in 2012, and the overall undergraduate retention rate rose by four percentage points over the same period. "It's not like, 'work hard and do your best,'" Sluder says. "We have data and allocated resources, and we're expecting that everybody's doing what they need to do."



MTSU

At Middle Tennessee State U., advisers use data to help identify students' needs.