

## Efficient scheduling helps meet course demand for less

With a 7 percent budget cut during this academic year and deeper cuts expected for next year, officials at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro need to manage resources more effectively than ever to meet student needs.

With enrollment for next fall projected to stay on target, making sure that class scheduling matches demand is critical.

Using Ad Astra Information Systems' Platinum Analytics for scheduling will enable the institution to plan strategically so that students can get the courses they need. "We think the timing is right for this software because of the need for efficiency in these economic times," said Ellen Robbins, director of academic systems and student achievement.

When officials at UNCG started considering the product, their focus was to ensure they were offering enough sections. But the ability to cut sections without hurting students' ability to graduate was a by-product of the effort.

"It's a sea change in the use of resources," said Laura Kelley, project manager for academic systems and student achievement.

"The news is not good, but [Platinum Analytics] informs the decisions," Robbins said.

When most institutions build a schedule, officials start by looking at the number of students who have registered for each course in the past, said Tom Shaver, Ad Astra's chief executive officer.

But the problem with that approach is that students can register for seats only if they're offered, he said. That process answers the question, "What did stu-

dents settle for based on the limited choices available?"

The traditional approach doesn't consider what courses students need to progress and graduate. And those who aren't making rapid progress are more likely to quit, Shaver said.

Platinum Analytics integrates with degree audit systems to determine where seats are needed, and where more are offered than needed. That allows institutions to make strategic changes that improve course access for students.

Since changes can be politically and culturally unpopular, it's important to choose the ones that will have the most impact, Shaver said.

Currently, versions of the program are compatible with about half the commercial degree-audit systems available, Shaver said. More are being added over time.

The program has a "hub and spoke" design. That means that the core functions don't need to be rewritten as new degree audit systems are added. Just the "spoke" — the connection with the degree audit system — needs to be reworked, he said.

It's about a three- to four-month process to implement Platinum Analytics. The best time to start is University immediately after registration so that officials can use that data and have time to make adjustments if needed. ■

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## Program analyzes course demand based on multiple variables

At most institutions, officials roll forward the course schedule from fall to fall and then make adjustments to reflect changes they know about. Ad Astra Information Systems' Platinum Analytics enables them to consider more variables that matter to students and can help the institution operate more efficiently. The components the program analyzes are:

- **Historical trends.** The program compares the actual enrollment in each course with the number of seats offered in past terms.
- **Baseline information.** Data from the most recent course offering is factored in. For example, for a fall 2009 course, the baseline would be fall 2008.
- **Demand analysis.** Based on the programs students Platinum Analytics predicts the likelihood they will take a particular class in the upcoming semester.

- **Student roadmap.** Students create a plan for completing requirements for their degree. This component of the Platinum Analytics is still in development and will become available next summer. Knowing student expectations for course availability will provide additional data about demand for courses.

"We rarely ask the student, ironically," said Ellen Robbins, director of Academic Systems and Student Achievement at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. The student roadmap will change that, and will make the students' plans an important part of scheduling.

Each of these four types of analysis provides a different look at the data. Officials can determine how much weight to assign to each one.

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Rather than being the type of program that accepts inputs and spits out a schedule, Platinum Analytics provides information that helps officials with deep institutional knowledge make decisions, said Tom Shaver, Ad Astra's chief executive officer.

At UNCG, officials piloted the program by looking at courses in the College of Arts and Sciences. The dean used the historical trend and baseline data for planning the fall 2008 course schedule. Deans and department heads also identified courses to follow for further discussion.

For example, in analyzing the data for a particular business communications course, the historical trend showed a projected need of 183 seats, compared with the 175 planned. The baseline term showed a need for 194 seats — 19 more than the number planned. But a program analysis showed a projected need of 768 seats. That figure indicated that a potential bottleneck was being created. If a section were offered in the spring as well as the fall, that could help students get the classes they needed.

On the other hand, the historical trend, baseline

term and program analysis for a psychology course all projected a need of between 69 and 82 seats. The institution could use faculty members more efficiently by cutting back from the 300 planned seats for the course.

Beyond helping with the schedule for a given term, Platinum Analytics allows officials to recognize trends in student interest and enrollment that should have an impact on scheduling.

The program can also be used to focus on specific factors that impact scheduling. For example, the poor economy means a lessened chance that institutions will renovate classroom space to meet the demand for more technology. Analysis could help determine the best policies for the use of the high-technology classrooms in prime time, Shaver said.

Also, if it's not practical to add a section where a bottleneck has been identified, officials can drill down into the data to determine which students needed a seat in the course but were not able to enroll. For example, if adding a section in the summer is possible, officials could send students an e-mail notifying them of that option. ■

## Platinum Analytics benefits students, institutions

If you're like a lot of registrars who have spoken recently with Tom Shaver, you're being asked to use your institution's data strategically. Shaver is chief executive officer of Ad Astra Information Systems. Ad Astra's Platinum Analytics could help you achieve this goal. The program offers two main benefits, according to Shaver. They are:

- **Student success benefit.** The program can help you identify course registration bottlenecks that could interfere with students completing their degrees. For example, analysis using it might show that 350 students could benefit from taking

a particular course in a given term, and every fall that number gets higher. But the institution has never offered more than 200 seats in the course.

By adding two or three sections, officials could improve the ability of students to graduate on time.

- **Efficiency benefit.** Officials can help ensure that courses are full. Otherwise, some faculty members might teach half-full courses, yet the institution must hire adjunct faculty for additional sections of certain courses at the last minute. Efficient scheduling saves the institution this expense, which can be significant. ■

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