



Helping Students Help Themselves

By Adam Boretz - Posted Jun 1, 2009

Like most colleges and universities in North America, Ottawa's Algonquin College has faced its share of student retention issues. With the start of every semester, some students have more trouble adjusting, face unexpected challenges, and need unanticipated academic help or guidance. And while many of those students find the help they need, some don't. Some students fall through the cracks, fail to graduate, or even drop out.

With those students in mind and the start of the fall 2008 semester approaching, Algonquin decided in the summer that the time was right to start addressing the problem.

"For a college like Algonquin that's committed to doing everything it can for student success—which is getting our students through to graduation—we decided that we had to see if there were earlier interventions that we could be tackling," says Kyle Murray, special adviser of academic initiatives at Algonquin College.

Murray says Algonquin wanted to reach out to new students by the fourth week of their first semester at college—both to formally welcome them and to get an early indication of areas in which they needed assistance. And for this, Algonquin turned to Vocantas, a developer of interactive voice response (IVR) systems.

According to Gary Hannah, president and CEO of Vocantas, officials at Algonquin were aware of the work the company did in the healthcare vertical and thought it had proved its ability to write an effective script and call flow.

"When you make a call, our philosophy is there should be something in it for the caller," says Hannah, noting that the company didn't want the calls to seem intrusive to students. "It's not a telemarketing call. It's calling because it's going to help you in some way. And in Algonquin's case, it was helping [students] be more successful."

In September, Algonquin launched Vocantas' Student Engagement solution—and with such success that the college used it again in January at the start of the spring semester. The solution contacted new students by phone and provided them with the opportunity to complete a short survey about their academic needs, challenges, and experiences since arriving at Algonquin.

The system asked students a variety of questions: Had they learned about the school's support systems? Had they made contact with their program coordinators or academic advisers? Would they

benefit from academic advisement, tutorial assistance, financial assistance, or assistance with study skills, note-taking, or time management? Would they benefit from personal counseling?

And then the system asked what Murray calls the critical question: Having identified areas of concern, would students want the college to contact them to address their issues?

The solution provided the college with a very different approach than the one to which is was accustomed, Murray adds. In the past, school officials waited for students to come forward with a problem, but this was a proactive way of reaching out to help them.

And students are responding. During the first campaign in the fall, 95 percent of the students completed the entire survey, and of those, 80 percent identified at least one area in which they needed assistance, and 68 students agreed to be contacted. During the spring campaign, 50 percent of students completed the entire survey, another 49 percent finished part of the survey, and 127 students agreed to be contacted.

"There was a high engagement, and that engagement was higher than we anticipated when we first started meeting with Vocantas," Murray says. "We had reservations about how students would react to an automated voice system.... We were very impressed—once they got the student on the line, the completion rate was quite good, and it did give us the information we required."

According to Hannah, the deployment exceeded even Vocantas' expectations. "From an industry point of view, that's huge," he says. "The acceptance rate was huge, and probably the more rewarding thing at the end of the day was the number of students who were willing to talk to the automated systems [and] say, 'Here's where you can help me be more successful in my college career.'"

Additionally, Hannah says the deployment offers further evidence that people do not mind interacting with machines instead of live agents. "People are more likely to be open and honest and state where they're having challenges in an automated system because they're not getting judged," he says, noting that no students complained about receiving the automated calls. "It was showing that someone was caring. And the other thing was that they really did like talking to the system because they felt...there's something in it for them."

Right on Track

And while Murray says Algonquin will have to track the numbers to see how the solution affects retention over time, he can point to some immediate benefits—particularly in time saved. To make the same number of calls manually would have taken hundreds of hours, he says.

As another benefit, the data provided by Student Engagement is being used by different departments within the college to identify specific issues facing students. With that data they are also trying to identify strategies that will help not just individual students but the entire student body.

"If students self-identify areas that they think are weaknesses, and we can meet them one-on-one for sessions related to those [areas], we can help them feel more comfortable at the college, have a better chance of being successful, and, hence, lead on to graduation," Murray says. "That goes to a deeper engagement inside the life of the college and a deeper engagement where students get a definite sense that I indicated a need and there's the college trying to help me out. It brings them into the family of the college much more deeply."

Despite the success of the deployment, Murray says it was not without its share of challenges, some of which remain even today. One issue was coming up with the right questions and wording them in a way that students would understand. Focus groups helped with that, but Murray says it could take a while to refine the questions further.

Murray also says the most recent use of Student Engagement went more smoothly than the one in the fall. The first time around, many students had provided invalid or outdated contact numbers. The next time, students were asked to provide an additional contact number—often a cell phone—that would be called after three unsuccessful attempts to the primary number.

Finally, Murray says he initially was unsure what kind of reports school officials would want or need. “It was hard to predict the first time what kinds of reports we would want—how I would want the data reported back for my faculty to use,” he says. “And this time it was a phenomenal difference. It all came back exactly in the format we were going to need.”

Murray credits Vocantas and the collaborative nature of the work between the company and the college for the deployment’s success. “I was extremely impressed with the time, effort, and support that [Vocantas] put in to help us with this venture,” he says, noting that the economic downturn could alter the school’s partnership going forward.

“My initial reaction is that we’re getting good value for the dollar,” Murray says. “In terms of the quality of the information we’re getting, it’s second to none, and I would heartily endorse other institutions looking at it as a means of moving themselves ahead in this area.”

App At a Glance

In Deploying Vocantas’ Student Engagement to reach out to new students, gauge their needs, and increase student retention, Algonquin College has seen:

- 99 percent of students completing part or all of the school’s second automated outbound survey;
- close to 200 students agreeing to follow-up calls to address their issues and concerns; and
- the elimination of what would have been hundreds of hours of non-stop manual calls by live agents.