

CASE
STUDY



South Carolina State University



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The Challenge

From 2014-2019, enrollment at South Carolina State University dropped by 26%. During the same time period, a legislative subcommittee in South Carolina voted for a two-year closure of the then 118-year-old Historically Black University, citing financial concerns.

While the closure fortunately never occurred, the institution still faced significant economic pressures due to the decline in enrollment. South Carolina State University needed to grow its incoming class and reduce summer melt to solidify its economic future.

On top of enrollment pressures, South Carolina State University was grappling with a change in student (and applicant) expectations. Prospective students increasingly use phones to research schools, as well as to apply and engage with admissions staff. This means that resources need to be mobile-friendly in order to be student-friendly. South Carolina State University also recognized that students increasingly expect digital platforms with on-demand support, available 24/7.

Taken together, the pressures for a wider funnel of prospective students and new tools to support both current students and prospects more effectively led South Carolina State University to look for ways to make the experience of enrolling and staying enrolled as frictionless as possible.



Charting a Path Forward

The university's leadership under Colonel Alexander Conyers, President of the University (who joined in May 2021), and Dr. Manicia Finch, Vice President of Enrollment Management (who joined in January 2022), brought several solutions to the table to solve the enrollment challenge and the expectations gap simultaneously.

Working with the Partnership for Education Advancement, South Carolina State University [implemented a Customer Relationship Management \(CRM\)](#) system and integrated a university chatbot, as well as a number of additional enrollment management and student success related projects. The CRM and integrated university chatbot supported significant enrollment increases. With Conyers and Finch at the head, a cross-department team came together to embrace the new tools, and implement them successfully into South Carolina State's operations.

A CRM for Recruitment and Admissions

The adoption of a CRM was aimed at updating recruitment and outreach processes, streamlining application procedures, and building a data-driven communications approach. In addition to offering improved functionality for staff, the CRM also created an opportunity for business process reengineering, and enabled staff to re-imagine workflows. The new technology and updated processes played a key role in driving efficiencies that allow South Carolina State University's lean staff to manage the increasing number of applications and lessen the administrative burden of processing them.

The CRM was crucial for increasing and managing growing interest from potential students, as well as facilitating communication with the new class of enrolling students. It also tracks enrollment and recruitment efforts, enabling the university to identify and engage with prospective students effectively.

Manual processing [...] was a big chunk of their day. Now [the data team] can focus on recruiting, answering phone calls, and more.

Tammy Clubbs | Director of Enrollment Management Marketing & CRM

Prior to adopting a CRM, South Carolina State University's busy administrators were often tasked with entering student application data into the system by hand for hours at a time. Implementing Slate, a customizable CRM produced by Technolutions, allowed information from the Common App to flow directly into university systems (a service that was impossible with the school's previous digital infrastructure).

Tammy Clubbs, Director of Enrollment Management Marketing & CRM at South Carolina State, noted that before the Common App was incorporated into Slate, there was "a lot of manual processing that the data team had to do. That was a big chunk of their day. Now they can focus on recruiting, answering phone calls, and more."



Chatbots and Web-bots for Campus Connection

South Carolina State University also realized they needed to reach students where and how they wanted to be reached. Alton Russell, Associate Director for Partnership Engagement and Program Development at Ed Advancement, noted the importance of adapting to new modes of communication: “Students don’t read email anymore—now, you’re right there in their pockets with a quick text.”

Leveraging a managed service chatbot, South Carolina State University was able to automatically send text messages to students while also offering additional support with a web-bot service on the university’s website.

South Carolina State began reminding current students about key on-campus services (e.g. advising appointments, tutoring services, events thrown by on campus organizations, financial aid deadlines, etc.), along with direct links to these services. These messages often came in the form of questions to boost engagement (e.g. *Have you checked in with your advisor? Do you know where the tutoring center is? Do you have an outstanding bill?*). Alongside these preliminary messages, the service began sending “behavioral messages” to assess student satisfaction (e.g. *How are you doing? Is there anything we can help you with?*). Any questions that the chat bot could not respond to were passed along to the school, to be answered within 48 hours.

According to South Carolina State University staff, the web-bot is often used late at night or early in the morning. This allows students to get answers to their questions as they think of them—well outside of business hours. This service was also pivotal in increasing retention and reducing summer melt by engaging students through targeted messages. In addition to offering students quick, helpful answers to pressing questions, the bot also helped redirect easy-to-answer questions away from university call centers during normal business hours, decreasing call volume and allowing staff to focus on more difficult student questions or other pressing responsibilities.

Outcomes

South Carolina State University saw their first-year enrollment grow by a whopping 32% from 2021-2022. This enrollment growth reflects South Carolina State University's dramatic increase in applications—a 176% increase in a single year. This is striking given national trends: college enrollment overall [declined between 2019 and 2022](#), and [some studies](#) indicate that first-year enrollment numbers are going down across the board in the US.

While enrollment growth was most notable, the institution also saw improvements in student engagement and support. According to Betty Boatwright, South Carolina State Enrollment Management Student Counselor, the “integration and linkage between these projects has truly transformed and enhanced South Carolina State’s ability to serve and educate students.”

South Carolina State University’s enrollment growth made the other initiatives – its managed service SMS and web-bot –even more important. In particular, the chatbot and text platform offered a cost effective and scalable way to reach a freshman class that grew significantly.

Importantly, these new solutions supported one of South Carolina State University’s primary goals: financial stability. New enrollment has helped the university net over a million dollars of revenue in tuition and fees in 2023 alone.



Enrollment Growth:

The integration of CRM and strategic communication efforts resulted in a significant increase in enrollment. The first year after these initiatives (Fall 2021-Fall 2022) saw a 13% growth in total enrollment; total enrollment grew another 15% in the year after (Fall 2022-Fall 2023). This trend was no doubt aided by the efficient use of the university’s new CRM (Slate) with the Common App, which streamlined the application process.

The CRM integration’s success can also be measured in terms of the influx of *new* students enrolled at South Carolina State: the school saw its number of new students increase 57% in the first year after the integration, and a further 13% in the year after.

According to Dr. Finch, Slate has been crucial to this success: “We’re growing enrollment—we had an increase this year, but I’m hoping that next year we’ll have an even bigger increase, and I’ll be able to tell you that Slate has been a part of that.”

Enhanced Student Support:

Mainstay's implementation reduced the administrative workload by over 400 hours, providing immediate responses to time-sensitive student queries. The low opt-out rate and high engagement levels indicated the effectiveness of this strategy. The chatbot also collected contact information of prospective students, aiding in future recruitment efforts.

Integration and linkage between these projects has truly transformed and enhanced South Carolina State's ability to serve and educate students.

Betty Boatwright | South Carolina State Enrollment Management Student Counselor

Lessons Learned

South Carolina State's success, while notable, is far from irreplicable, offering a model for other institutions grappling with similar challenges. Supportive, invested leadership and thoughtful, timely integration of technology were essential to the process.

The importance of sequencing implementation cannot be overstated: campuses should adopt tech solutions slowly based on the bandwidth of their tech teams. An approach centered in each school's tech capacities and specific goals is the best path forward. What's more, gauging capacity, funding, bandwidth across campus administration and departments can help speed the process of adoption tremendously. Wayne Cummings, the Partnership for Education Advancement's Chief Technology Officer, noted that "there is a whole bunch of due diligence we need to do before [any kind of tech implementation or data gathering on campus]...because doing it on the fly is impossible."

Cummings noted that South Carolina State's leadership was "very deliberate" in terms of pursuing collaboration with the Partnership: "Aspiration, drive and determination were key to success here," Cummings said. Dr. Finch echoed this sentiment, noting the importance of the Partnership team's alignment with the school's goals. "What Ed Advancement offered was a dream come true," she said, "[their offerings] were all things that aligned with my strategy."

This aspiration, drive, and determination hasn't ended with the CRM and chatbot projects, however. South Carolina State University is currently working on a campus-wide integrated data system that will bring data from the CRM and other systems together and enable even better services for students. The unified data system, once completed, has the potential to power artificial intelligence analytics that will support South Carolina State University in leapfrogging to next-gen analytics and customer support.

In collaboration with the Partnership for Education Advancement, South Carolina State University is taking bold steps toward an AI-enabled system that will continue to support their enrollment, retention, and student support aspirations. President Alexander Conyers put it this way: "When I think about what we've been able to do, it's with partners who can show us what can be done. My job is to continue that, and be a force multiplier to get us to the finish line."