

CASE
STUDY



VIRGINIA STATE UNIVERSITY

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THE CONTEXT: BUILDING AN OPPORTUNITY UNIVERSITY

When President Makola M. Abdullah took the reins of Virginia State University (VSU) in 2016, his goal was to create an “[opportunity university](#)” for students—creating a place that was accessible, affordable, and leads to economic mobility.

VSU’s demographics are well-aligned to this goal: The institution has the [highest percentage of students receiving a Pell Grant](#) among Virginia’s four-year public higher education institutions. In fact, VSU’s rate of Pell-eligible students is twice that of some other public institutions in Virginia.

The institution, true to this mission of affordability, has worked to keep tuition low—enabling students to seize the opportunity of a college education. VSU’s tuition is among the lowest of any institution in the state. This extends beyond sticker price: Students at VSU who receive financial aid [pay the lowest average net price](#) across the state’s 15 public institutions.

But keeping tuition low also means less tuition revenue and limited resources relative to peer institutions. And because VSU is smaller than many other state institutions, it receives [less funding](#) from the state (even though per-pupil spending is [comparable](#)). With limited resources, VSU is very strategic about how it deploys its limited resources (including both money and time) to ensure it is driving the most value for its student population.

But even while remaining clear-eyed about what VSU does (and doesn’t) have the capacity to take on internally, the campus has big aspirations, looking for ways to improve the student experience, increase VSU’s reach to more incoming students, and set graduates on a path to economic success.



THE SOLUTION: BEGINNING A PARTNERSHIP

VSU and Ed Advancement began their engagement in January 2022 and shortly after launched a climate survey to identify areas for collaboration with the most immediate need. Rodney Hall, deputy chief of staff at VSU, described seeking an “appetizer” ahead of larger opportunities: quick, actionable initiatives that would lead to relatively fast outcomes or insights. Never wanting to overstretch or overestimate internal capacity, VSU moved through a number of light-lift, high-value projects with Ed Advancement, hoping to establish the partnership and bring value to VSU students at the same time.

The survey identified three projects that VSU and Ed Advancement could immediately collaborate on: developing a post-graduate survey, establishing a mental health hotline, and enhancing VSU’s digital marketing strategy.

Early Wins Set the Stage

VSU’s initial set of projects focused on the institution’s value proposition: capturing insights about what sets the university apart and sharing those in ways that drive interest from prospective students.

As part of that effort, VSU developed and deployed a post-graduate survey to measure areas of student need and potential improvement on campus. The process was as important as the result: Mr. Hall credits the survey deployment as an important opportunity for VSU to evaluate “how [they] were capturing student data, graduate data” and how to use it more strategically.

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Dr. Makola Abdullah | President, Virginia State University

Through Ed Advancement funding, VSU was also able to deploy an after-hours mental health crisis line to students. The additional services function as an extension of existing campus mental health services. VSU’s staff handles student mental health matters from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.; after hours, the crisis line is available to students to ensure they have access to a counselor 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The virtual counselors can also escalate a response, if needed. As the VSU team noted, while this is an important resource for students, it also eases the burden on counseling staff.

Larger-Scale Projects Take Shape

As the relationship between VSU and Ed Advancement matured, so too did the projects that both undertook with it: Once assured of its internal capacity and the value Ed Advancement brings, VSU felt comfortable enough to branch into bigger and more ambitious projects.

Ed Advancement partnered with VSU to develop a new, comprehensive strategic enrollment plan. As Dr. Alexis Brooks-Walter, the associate vice provost of enrollment at VSU, explained, “We have gone back to that plan over and over again the last two years to see, what did the data say? How can



we grow, but grow strategically? How can we help the academic arena to make sure our students are matriculating on time? It has been a partnership that has helped us build capacity here at VSU. It's allowed us to make data-driven decisions and figure out, really like, within this realm in today's society where VSU can find its niche."

The strategic enrollment plan helped VSU to articulate President Abdullah's vision for the campus and share it with cross-campus stakeholders, creating a shared understanding of how every member of the campus community has a role to play in supporting retention, persistence and graduation. As Mr. Hall shared, "It was really a collaborative effort across campus. And I think it really helped to solidify Dr. Abdullah's vision [on] campus."

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Alongside the strategic enrollment work VSU undertook, the university was also able to tackle another light-lift, high-impact project: individualized student aid videos to help students better understand the financial aid award process. According to Mr. Hall, the impact on admissions yield was "tremendous": Students who are informed about exactly what to expect financially from their VSU experience have been more ready to commit to enrollment.

One of the most ambitious projects to date has been the implementation of a new customer relationship management (CRM) platform. Prior to VSU's partnership with Ed Advancement, the university struggled with its CRM. "It wasn't built for a school our size," explained Mr. Hall. "It wasn't built for communication. And so there were a lot of workarounds we had to do with [the prior CRM] that made our jobs a little more difficult than they needed to be."

Ed Advancement's Historically Black Colleges and Universities Digital Transformation (HBCU Dx) initiative utilized a strategy of building a "core" instance of a Slate CRM, then deploying that core across multiple HBCU campuses. This approach enabled schools to both save time and money: Consultants to support CRM transitions [can cost institutions](#) tens—or even hundreds—of thousands of dollars. And institutions may not have the internal resources to build their own instance without outside support.

Through the HBCU Dx CRM work, Ed Advancement provided VSU both the technology and the technical assistance necessary to support the transition from a CRM that was not meeting the university's needs to one the university calls "ideal."

Currently, the CRM is fully established for undergraduate students, and is on track to be established for graduate students soon. VSU looks forward to building out a communications platform for graduate students, especially those who are primarily online students, and easing admissions processes by importing SAT data and Common App information directly into the CRM.

OUTCOMES: WALKING SO YOU CAN RUN

By starting with a few projects, showing their value, and building to more complex initiatives over time, VSU created deep buy-in for new solutions on campus. As a result, the institution hopes to continue many initiatives that began with grant funding (student financial aid videos, the mental health hotline, and the contract with the digital marketing professional) after the grant ends.

VSU's willingness to extend the complexity of its work in partnership with Ed Advancement—as well as its adoption of new strategic approaches and continuation of successful initiatives—reflects a truly mutual collaborative relationship between the two organizations. As Dr. Brooks-Walter put it, "It's been a fabulous partnership, and we have seen growth from our partnership with [the Ed Advancement team]. This is a win-win situation."



The data show it's working. During VSU's partnership with Ed Advancement (2022-2024), new student enrollment rose 7%.

But the biggest initiative is still underway. The initial collaboration between VSU and Ed Advancement has led to the conception of an entirely new solution: the Front Porch Portal. The Front Porch builds on the work of the CRM project, using Slate as the backbone for the portal.

As President Abdullah explained, "My vision for Front Porch is that [students] can access everything on their phones, that they can do everything they need to do at Virginia State University using their mobile device The more that we can get critical information to our students when they need it, which sometimes is in the middle of the night, the more successful they will be and we will be as an institution."

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The Front Porch Portal connects student data (as well as campus events and other information) from multiple data sources into one place, accessible through a single sign-on for students. The portal allows students to easily see their personal academic or financial information as well as other important campus events and deadlines. It also offers participating institutions a centralized place to share information and drive student engagement.

VSU is piloting the platform now, and the data will refresh every hour between 8 a.m. and 8 p.m. ET, offering up-to-date information that can ease the significant workload that VSU staff takes on already.

The collaboration between VSU and Ed Advancement has led to quantifiable success in enrollment; the continuation and adoption of successful small-scale projects; and the launch of new, broader-scale initiatives that are on their way to driving even greater impact.

The partnership between VSU and Ed Advancement started slowly for very good reasons—but now it is moving full speed toward its goals.

As President Abdullah said, "Everything that we have worked on with Ed Advancement has made Virginia State University better. And we believe that Ed Advancement is a critical partner to continuing to help Virginia State University become the best that it can be."