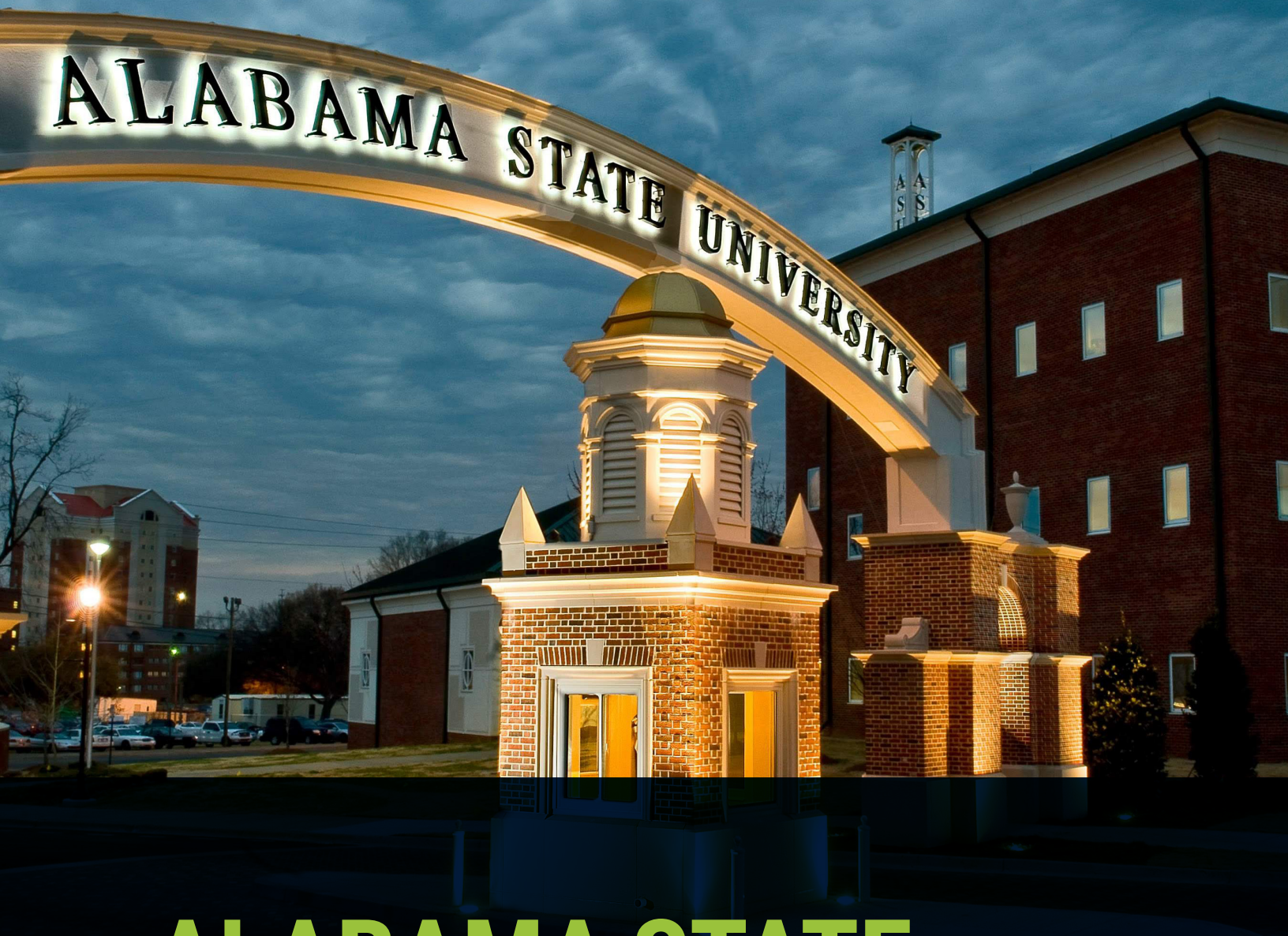




ALABAMA STATE UNIVERSITY

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About the Organizations



Ed Advancement is a national nonprofit dedicated to advancing socioeconomic mobility by strengthening mission-focused colleges and universities, including historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), that serve low-income, first-generation, and historically under-resourced students. Through deep institutional partnerships, strategic capacity building, and operational and technology-based solutions, Ed Advancement works collaboratively with higher education leaders, philanthropy, and other partners to improve enrollment, retention, and graduation outcomes while supporting long-term institutional sustainability. Since 2018, Ed Advancement has worked alongside more than 70 colleges and universities in 19 states and the District of Columbia, serving nearly 300,000 students.



For more than 20 years, Whiteboard Advisors has collaborated with the most transformative organizations, individuals and investors in education. Our diverse team of educators, wonks and storytellers brings in-depth understanding of policy, technology and practice to bear on cutting-edge research, powerful writing, and the design of communications and advocacy campaigns that challenge the status quo. Whether we're working with startups or the most established organizations in education, we're passionate about taking breakthrough ideas to scale.

About the Authors

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Erica Price Burns is a senior vice president at Whiteboard Advisors where she leads a team that advises Fortune 500 companies, foundations and investors working at the intersection of policy, practice and innovation. For more than a decade, Erica's research and writing on the connections between education, equity and economic mobility have been featured in CNBC, Wired, TechCrunch, Forbes and the Stanford Social Innovation Review, among others. Prior to joining Whiteboard Advisors, Erica worked for U.S. Senator and former Denver Public Schools Superintendent Michael Bennet and served in a variety of roles in Democratic politics and on Capitol Hill. Erica graduated magna cum laude from Washington University in St. Louis where she earned a degree in political science and economics.

ZOE ALMEIDA

Zoe Almeida is a senior associate at Whiteboard Advisors, where she works at the intersection of communications and research to support both K-12 and higher education clients. Prior to joining Whiteboard Advisors, she worked to help develop educational content for a major edtech platform. Zoe graduated with honors from Harvard College, where she earned a bachelor's degree in English literature. She went on to complete a Master of Philosophy degree in Criticism and Culture at Churchill College, University of Cambridge.

Cover Image Source: Alabama State University

THE CHALLENGE:

Alabama's colleges and universities found themselves grappling with massive budget shortfalls between 2008-2017 when the state cut per-pupil funding [by more than 30%](#). To close the gap, public institutions across the state raised tuition, [some by as much as 60%](#). A recent State Higher Education Finance report found that by 2021, the net tuition revenue in Alabama had ballooned to [twice the national average](#), reflecting the limited resources available to higher education institutions throughout the state.

Alabama State University, founded over 150 years ago as the first state-sponsored higher education institution for Black students in Alabama, faced a particularly acute challenge. Alabama State enrolls more students from low-income backgrounds [than any other higher education institution](#) in the state, and any increase in tuition would undoubtedly impact those students. The institution was stuck between a rock and a hard place. In the end, Alabama State was forced to increase its tuition. In the wake of these state policy changes, enrollment dropped by double digits, with more than half of students who left citing the tuition increase as a primary cause, according to an on-campus survey.

When Dr. Quinton T. Ross, Jr. joined the university as president in 2017 (after the tuition increase) he immediately [moved to stabilize tuition](#) to maintain affordability. But tuition is only part of the revenue picture for any institution. Recruiting and retaining students also needed to remain a top priority. “We needed to revamp how we’re doing our [enrollment and retention] work,” said President Ross. Alabama State realized that new strategies and tools were likely needed to meet its enrollment goals.

Reliable, timely communication with current and prospective students was a particular pain point. Assistant Vice President for Admissions and Recruitment Dr. Freddie Williams Jr. recalled that prior to 2023, “We didn’t have a CRM [Customer Relationship Management system], so our communication was basically manual. And communication was not going out on a regular basis as we wanted.”



Source: Alabama State University

Deferred maintenance of on-campus digital infrastructure was also limiting operational efficiency, creating friction for students and applicants. “We had old systems, old processes,” said Dr. Williams. “We needed to have software tools that helped us streamline our work and do our work in a more effective and efficient way.”



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Dr. Freddie Williams Jr., Assistant Vice President for Admissions and Recruitment

THE SOLUTION:

In 2021, President Ross met with Ed Advancement to discuss joining the Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) Digital Transformation Initiative (HBCU Dx) and became a powerful champion on campus for the new systems and processes that Alabama State identified as opportunities and eventually implemented through the initiative. “Dr. Ross’s leadership has been a game changer,” said Ed Advancement Senior Vice President Robin Minor. “His drive and buy-in have been key in pushing forward digital transformation on campus.”

President Ross’s vision was to reinvigorate student support while creating a strong sense of community within the institution. “It was about reimagining the student experience, increasing engagement and ensuring positive outcomes for our population of students,” [Dr. Ross said](#). “We sought solutions to increase our recruitment reach, facilitate timely and meaningful communication among faculty, staff, and students, provide support for students selecting ASU, and track student experiences.”

The needs assessment that Alabama State undertook as part of the partnership identified several areas for engagement. Of Ed Advancement’s collaborative approach, Dr. Williams shared, “We appreciated Ed Advancement’s comprehensive assessment to identify the changes and solutions that would be most impactful for ASU.”

Through the partnership with Ed Advancement, Alabama State worked to optimize its financial aid and create an automated merit scholarship awarding system for incoming students. Before this program’s adoption, Alabama State had few merit scholarships, according to Dr. Williams: “We had competitive merit awards for a small percentage of incoming students, but that’s it.”

Not only did the number of students receiving aid increase under the new system, but Alabama State also informed students of their merit scholarship almost immediately after admission through automated notifications and emails. Prior to adoption, Alabama State typically did not make scholarship decisions for incoming freshmen until December, with a second round occurring sometime in February. Giving students a clearer financial picture earlier makes it easier for them to commit to Alabama State, safe in the knowledge that they can afford their degree.

Alabama State also knew that to meet its enrollment goals it had to make the application and recruitment processes smoother and more efficient. With the support of Ed Advancement, Alabama State implemented



Source: [Photo by Allison Shelley/Complete College Photo Library](#)

a CRM for the first time. The new platform gave the institution much-needed application functionality: For the first time, applicants were able to submit their application electronically and quickly receive notification of acceptance with clear next steps. Automatic notifications and emails replaced printed letters confirming receipt of applications, offering both faster updates for prospective students and saving staff time in printing, stuffing and stamping letters.

Because supporting students early—even prior to matriculation—matters, Alabama State developed and launched a preenrollment program to introduce students and families to important elements of campus life. The institution’s Success B4 the Nest program provides a series of online workshops for parents and students meant to reduce summer melt and smoothly transition students into the fall. The CRM helped the institution identify and communicate with students enrolling at Alabama State for the first time and share program details and deadlines. The preenrollment program covers topics like financial aid requirements and academic majors and, after piloting with a small group in 2023, has grown to over 100 participants.

Alabama State wanted to further support incoming students’ success by offering substantive training for first-year advisors and staff working to prevent students from stopping out. Through the partnership with Ed Advancement, Alabama State advisors received coaching on how best to support students facing complex barriers to support student retention. According to Assistant Vice President for Student Success Dr. Ronda Westry, the training was effective in exposing staff to new and thoughtful approaches to student engagement: “I can see the difference in how they’re assisting students ... it truly is more holistic, and it’s not just dealing with academic policies and regulations and due dates and things like that. But [the new approach is] really developing that relationship with students to get a little deeper.”

The initiative has graduated to a train-the-trainer model at Alabama State — meaning that staff members are receiving training and certification to train other student-facing staff. Assistant Vice President for Planning and Strategic Analysis Bryn Bakoyema says that “It ... truly is a holistic approach to help students. [We’re] not just telling them, OK, well, these are the due dates; this is the policy; but [we’re] really developing relationships with our students just talking about their academics and their experiences at ASU.”

In addition to these initiatives, Alabama State University and Ed Advancement undertook several smaller projects, including adopting an artificial intelligence chatbot to support students 24/7, developing Hornet Connect (an on-campus communication service for students), customer service training for staff, and optimizing the Student Information System.



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President Quinton T. Ross, Jr.

THE OUTCOME:

Alabama State University’s enrollment gains have been tremendous: Fall 2023 saw the first increase in undergraduate enrollment in a decade and by fall 2025, enrollment had increased by 12%.

Retention also spiked in the same time frame: Retention hovered around 60% in 2023 and jumped to 72 % by 2025. Applications have also seen a meaningful increase—up 30% from last year alone.

Dr. Williams credits increased communication with prospective students through the CRM for helping to increase enrollment. “Constant communications have contributed to the [size of] the class last year, and we exceeded last year’s numbers as well...We attribute that, in part, to being able to talk with potential students and meet them [where they are].”

Dr. Williams also pointed to the immediate scholarship offers as a key lever in bringing in and supporting more students: “Now when students get an admissions letter saying, ‘Congratulations, you’ve been admitted,’ well, the next email they get says, ‘Congratulations, you’re a recipient of this scholarship.’ They’re hearing from us right away... and I think that’s contributing to the turnaround in [enrollment] numbers.”

The CRM transformed workloads for staff across the admissions and communications departments. Automation replaced time-intensive processes, like scanning applications and printing and mailing confirmation letters. As a result, admissions and communications staff have time and bandwidth to support students in other ways. “These roles will change because those functions won’t be needed,” Dr. Williams explained. “The labor-intensive things we did before have gone away with the upgrade to our systems.”

Of their initiatives with Ed Advancement, Dr. Westry said that “Capacity-building is certainly what we needed, and what has been done...we were doing a lot of things the hard and long way [before Ed Advancement]. If I had to use one word, it would be efficiency; that’s what these different products and opportunities have given us.”

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Dr. Rhonda Westry, Assistant Vice President for Student Success



Source: Alabama State University