



College of Saint Mary Increases Retention 6% in Just One Year with Watermark

The Challenge

When College of Saint Mary (CSM) changed their business model in 2016, they not only reduced their tuition by 33%, but also lowered student borrowings, increased student diversity, and the percentage of financially challenged students. In this process, maintaining undergraduate enrollment levels remained a high priority, with one strategy focused on undergraduate student retention. The biggest obstacles in this area were the lack of dedicated champions of retention and consistent streamlined communication with faculty and staff about students at risk. "Without a dedicated resource focused on student retention, faculty and staff were providing student support in their individual silos, in addition to their daily responsibilities," said Daniela Rojas, Assistant Dean of Student Success.

The Solution

CSM started shifting academic advising and mentorship from faculty and established a dedicated team to provide these services to students. This team began using Watermark's student success and engagement solution as the backbone to their appreciative advising program, using alerts, assessments, and regular reports to create partnerships with students based around what matters most to them. By splitting the student development department into three areas (student life, support services, and student success), the team is better equipped to offer co-designed support to students.

The Wins

Increased retention 6% in just one year: The school's efforts and collaboration with faculty and staff increased Fall-to-Spring retention from 82% in 2020-21 to 88% in the 2021-22 academic year.

260% growth in messaging: CSM has nearly quadrupled their communication with students by sending over 17,000 messages in the 2021-22 school year. This outreach helped organically raise awareness of different service offerings, activities on campus, and tasks that need to be completed.

An increase in 1x1 meetings: CSM's team responded to nearly 450 alerts in the 2021/22 academic year, leading to over 300 individual meetings with students to address specific issues. "Before Watermark, we had no way to track whether meetings were happening," Rojas said.

Alerts highlight areas for improvement: In addition, regular reporting has identified potential policy changes to support student success. "Attendance concerns were one of the highest alerts this year (at 19%), but many faculty don't have attendance policies," Rojas said. "Being able to report on this helps them see a correlation, and we can bring this forth to the faculty policy committee to address the issue on a larger scale."

More effective caseload management: CSM initially planned for student caseloads of 45-50, but advisors are handling 120-130 students each. Watermark has helped them understand where to focus their energy within these larger groups. "We learned that continuing students need more help and have provided mental health resources, tutoring, financial literacy guidance, and access to study hours to create a more positive experience for these students," Rojas said. "Our team still does interventions with students who need help."

A positive experience for students: Students shared feedback in a survey about their advising experiences, sharing insights about what worked well and what didn't. "Students said, 'I never felt judged,' which can be a huge barrier to seeking help," Rojas said. "We also got valuable feedback into what students need, resulting in planned enhancements to our financial literacy and career services."

Institution snapshot

College of St. Mary
Omaha, Nebraska

Institution Type:
Private/Not-for-profit
Master's College / University

Total full-time students: 939

Total full-time faculty: 85

Number of campuses: One

"I can't do my job without Watermark. Increasing retention is our main goal, but student satisfaction is important too. To bring positive change to our school, we need a more sophisticated advising model and more centralized processes to keep people on track for graduation. This solution makes that possible."

Daniela Rojas, Assistant Dean of Student Success, College of Saint Mary

"The return on investment of retention efforts such as Watermark cannot be underestimated. For us, the cost to recruit and enroll a new student far exceeds that of growing retention efforts. This ultimately benefits the students through improved persistence and graduation rates, as well as the financial bottom line of the institution."

Dr. Sarah Kottich, Executive Vice President, College of Saint Mary



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