



## **Mentor Case Study: University of South Florida Tampa, Florida**

### **Overview of University of South Florida**

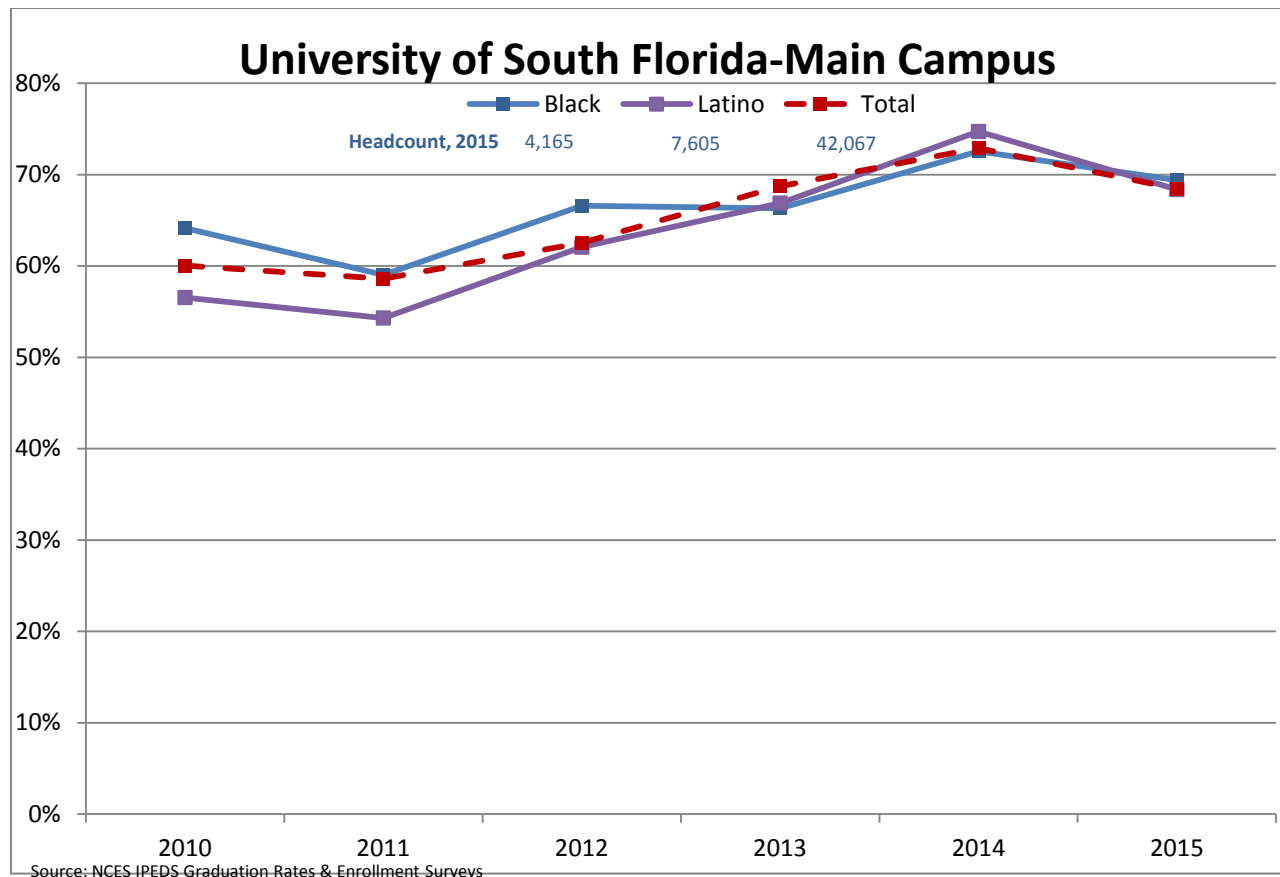
The University of South Florida (USF), located in Tampa, is a large, public four-year university offering undergraduate, graduate, specialist, and doctoral level degrees. It is the largest institution in the USF System, which also includes two other separately accredited institutions: USF St. Petersburg and USF Sarasota-Manatee. Serving more than 50,000 students, the USF System has an annual budget of \$1.6 billion and is ranked 29th in the nation for research expenditures among all public universities. USF Tampa is Carnegie classified as a Doctoral University: Highest Research Activity.

USF is comprised of 14 colleges offering more than 200 undergraduate majors and concentrations—with some of the most populated colleges being Medicine, Nursing, Pharmacy, Public Health, Arts & Sciences, Business, and Engineering. USF also offers numerous degree programs at the graduate, specialist and doctoral levels, including a Ph.D. in Medical Science.

USF celebrates its highly diverse student population, which is comprised of students representing all races, ethnicities, income levels, sexual identities, and more than 145 countries. USF prides itself on being a high-impact global research university dedicated to student success.

### **Data Trend Chart**

The chart below represents the University of South Florida's graduation trends for Black students (blue line), Latino students (purple line), and for all students (red line) over a period of five years.



**How did the University of South Florida get started on the “student success” path?**

In 2009, USF aspired to be a premier public research university with state, national and global impact that produces global citizens well prepared to compete in and contribute to the dynamic marketplace. However, with a six-year graduation rate of only 48 percent and a first-year student retention rate of 86 percent, USF faced student success challenges. To address these challenges, USF launched a Student Success Task Force that year and charged it to “present actionable and prioritized recommendations” to transform the culture of the university in order to raise retention and graduation rates. The 100-person task force consisted of representatives throughout campus and across all disciplines, and was intentionally composed to ensure university-wide contributions to the student success movement.

In 2010, the task force released a lengthy set of recommendations that began with three fundamental reforms: institutionalize student success, transform the culture to promote student success, and build research capacity to support student success initiatives. Since then, the task force has implemented numerous student-centric programs, reshaped university policies, introduced new software tools, developed targeted student success messaging campaigns, and embedded High Impact Practices in the curriculum to support and engage its very diverse student population.

## How does the University of South Florida sustain the student success movement?

### *What is the role of the leadership?*

USF's leadership—Board of Trustees, President, Provost, and senior management teams— have long been committed to the student success movement on campus. It was USF's President who called for a focus on student success in 2009 and the Provost who formed and charged the Student Success Task Force. The university leadership backed up its commitment by making an initial investment of \$3 million to launch recommended student success initiatives, as well as subsequent investments in programs, human resources, and initiatives. Leadership's commitment to the USF student success movement was clearly articulated in the university's 2013-2018 strategic plan.

“We will distinguish USF as an inclusive environment that expands access for students from all walks of life, creating a learner-centered environment where every aspect of the university is committed to student success,” said USF System President Judy Genshaft in the 2013-2018 Strategic Plan.

Today, “student success” is always present in communications from senior leadership. It is this top-down, unwavering, frequently articulated commitment that is a critical role for leadership to assume for any successful movement to take root and flourish.

### *What is the role of culture change?*

Early on, the USF Student Success Task Force identified the need for an institutional culture change to promote student success. Even though an Office of Student Success was formed at the task force's recommendation, this office and senior leadership continued to stress that student success was the responsibility of all faculty, staff, and administrators. Although some positions/units on campus hold greater or more obvious influence over students and their ability to progress—such as faculty, Financial Aid, academic advisors—USF is working to ensure all employees understand how they can contribute, too.

High-profile leadership “walking the talk” is critical for fueling the shift, and USF's President and Provost clearly demonstrate their support of students by taking the time to meet with students, personally addressing issues raised, and being visible (and approachable) on campus.

Shifting to a student success minded culture is an intentional and slow process requiring transparent communication of expectations and support from leadership, including recognition of duties performed well and necessary training—all of which USF has integrated into its campus.

### **What institutional data is used to drive efforts?**

2016 was a pivotal year for advancing the student success movement and in creating a truly 360-degree student success experience. Joining the efficiencies and analysis capabilities of Big Data, a new technology platform, and the care and expertise of our case management teams, USF has institutionalized student success on a campus of over 43,000 students. The results of this powerful combination include:

- A first-year retention rate of 90 percent was reached for both the 2015 and 2016 cohorts, the highest retention rate achieved in USF history. See Appendix: Graph 1
- A six-year graduation rate for the 2011 cohort reached 71 percent in 2017, the highest six-year graduation rate in the history of USF. See Appendix: Graph 2
- The achievement gap (measured as a 6-year graduation rate) by race and ethnicity has been eliminated. Black and Hispanic students graduate at rates equal or greater than that of white students. See Appendix: Graph 3
- At-risk students across the institution are experiencing a higher quality, more personalized and effective outreach, and guidance as the result of the student success case management program.

### **How were challenges overcome?**

Thanks to the work of the Student Success Task Force, USF had made significant improvements in both first-year student retention (89 percent) and six-year graduation (57 percent) rates by the end of the 2013- 14 academic year. However, the pace of improvement slowed in subsequent years as the student success initiatives were no longer moving the needle.

With aspirations of meeting and exceeding a 90 percent retention rate and 70 percent six-year graduation rate established by the State of Florida as the baseline for performance based funding, USF sought new and innovative methods to advance student success. Forward thinking leadership realized the need for earlier intervention to keep students on a solid path to graduation so, early in 2012, members of the Student Success team began utilizing an internally developed predictive model to determine the risk of attrition of first-year students.

This model, based on pre-matriculation data gathered via a survey of the incoming freshman class, helped to uncover groups of students that were likely to face challenges based on characteristics and their expectations. From this data, USF was able to identify 10 percent of first-year students most likely to need support and focus its outreach through a team of support staff from across campus. Although this information was helpful, retention rates barely improved.

Recognizing the power of data analytics, USF contracted with Civitas Learning in 2014 to deploy a student success platform that could generate predictors of persistence for all students. Implemented in 2016, the Civitas predictive analytics modeling software analyzed real-time

student data (including grades, class participation, absenteeism, etc.) to provide actionable reporting that enabled staff to pinpoint struggling students and provide personalized support when needed most.

With the implementation of powerful data tools, USF realized a need for a guiding body to put the data to use and determine/implement needed policy and process changes. Early in 2016, the Vice Provost for Student Success, Vice President of Student Affairs, and Dean of Undergraduate Studies formed the Persistence Committee. Comprised of approximately two dozen staff from across the institution—including academic advisors, academic advocates, financial aid advisors, career counselors, resident assistants, and other support personnel—the Persistence Committee provides cross-functional, data-informed student support. The committee meets weekly, reviews lists of at-risk students pulled from the predictive analytics platform, determines the appropriate means to intervene with each identified student, and assigns follow up.

In the fall of 2016, after months of working with hundreds of student cases, innovative leadership introduced a case management approach like that used in the healthcare industry. Case management would allow the Persistence Team to closely monitor students and resolve individual student issues in a more organized and efficient manner. USF case managers, known as academic advocates, initiate communications with each of the students, triage each case to identify what often is a confluence of issues, and coordinate the needed outreach by other student support specialists from a multitude of offices to provide the most effective and efficient level of care. The specialists—mental health counselors, financial aid counselors, student involvement professionals, resident advisors, etc.—form a broader group, the Care Team, who help to remove obstacles and provide specific resources to assist each student back to a successful path. The Persistence Committee meets weekly with the academic advocates, providing additional secure information about students in their curricular and co-curricular settings and feedback regarding possible interventions and next steps.

Initial communications tools used by the Persistence Committee consisted of bi-weekly meetings, spreadsheets, files, and a countless emails between academic advocates, other members, students, the Care Team and others on campus. As the student volume increased, it was evident that the university needed a formalized and efficient case management tool to facilitate the work. USF Information Technology worked with platform provider Appian to build USF's Archivum Insights case management software.

Early in 2017, USF's developers delivered phase I of a revolutionary student success case management system to monitor and individually manage at-risk students. This platform bridged various complex platforms (i.e., student information and learning management systems); integrated with the Civitas Learning software; featured state-of-the-art design; and addressed the functional needs of executives, academic advisors, and student support personnel.

Archivum allows the academic advocates, as well as the Persistence Committee and the Care Team members, to access student data, add and review notes about students, create referrals to other campus partners, and create and manage student cases. USF's new analytics-driven case

management system transformed a spreadsheet and paper intensive process to a user-friendly dashboard to guide users through the individual student cases. Although still in development, the next phase of the system will provide a student dashboard so all students can see their personal academic standing and their pre-assigned academic advocate and Care Team members for self-service. The new system is already proving its value as an efficient tool to intercept students, streamline case management communications, and generate executive reporting to support USF's most effective and transformational student success initiatives to date.

### **Knowing what you know now, what would the University of South Florida do differently?**

USF would have better managed our expectations and not expected the adoption and implementation of predictive analytics platforms to change attitudes or behavior quickly. People and institutions are slow to change and, aside from the skepticism that so often greets new technologies and data capabilities, the power of new tools like predictive analytics is not so readily recognized. People are slow to adapt their practices to the capabilities of the new tools. In the case of USF, the adoption of predictive analytics was the start of a conversation that is now in its fourth year.

### **Advice for those just starting the student success journey?**

1. Frame the goals of your student success efforts in line with the strategic priorities of your institution. Successful student success efforts are linked by champions of the efforts, as well as leadership support, resources, and a clear path in the broader mission of the institution.
2. Focus your efforts on key areas in need of improvement. Trying to tackle too many things can lead to confusion across campus, initiative fatigue, and not enough resources appropriated to any given effort at a time.
3. Find a champion or consistent set of champions who will serve as the constant in carrying the message of the student success effort at your institution. USF was fortunate to have that in Dr. Paul Dosal, who was initially tapped to create and lead the Office of Student Success, which evolved into a division also encompassing Student Affairs and Undergraduate Studies.
4. If embarking on predictive analytics, be mindful that a tool or set of tools should augment your student success efforts, not define or lead them.
5. Be mindful of the natural cycle that student success reform brings. Units and roles will be redefined, once or more during your journey. As an institution, it is incumbent on us to ensure we provide units and roles to find themselves in the journey, or sometimes redefine themselves in the journey.
6. Analytical tools deployed simply shine the light on problems. These tools don't solve anything. People do.

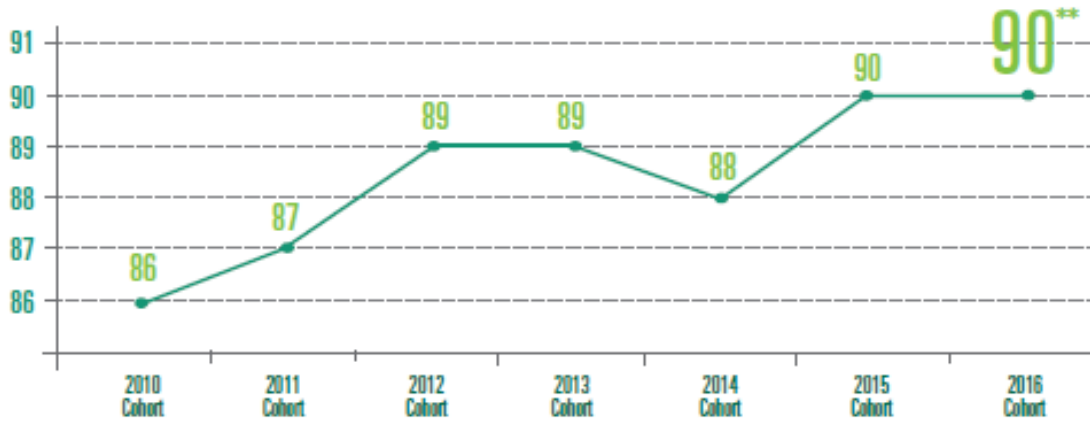
The transformation of USF's institutional culture has probably been the most important change driving its student success initiative upward. USF deliberately set out to change attitudes and practices of faculty, staff, and students. The university used to find every excuse in the world to explain why its employees and students could not achieve higher levels of performance. The responsibility for student success was often placed on specific units—Student Affairs, Undergraduate Studies—or on the students, and was not owned by all units on campus. For seven years now, USF has promoted the notion that everyone has a responsibility for student success and, more recently, expanded that mantra with the belief that every student will succeed. In this new cultural climate, poor student performance is becoming the aberration, not the norm.

## Appendix – DATA

Graph 1:

### FIRST-YEAR RETENTION RATE

PERCENT

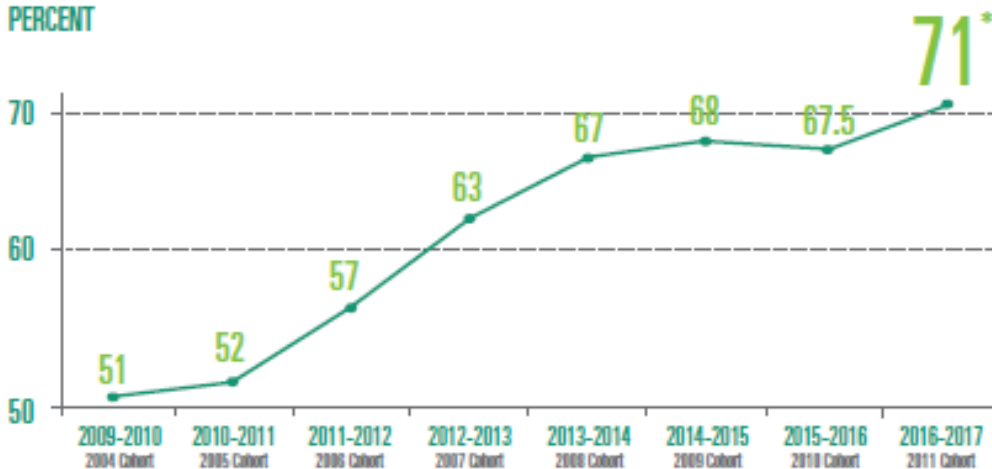


\*Data reported follow IPEDS methodology and are preliminary based on internal data

Graph 2:

### SIX-YEAR GRADUATION RATE

PERCENT

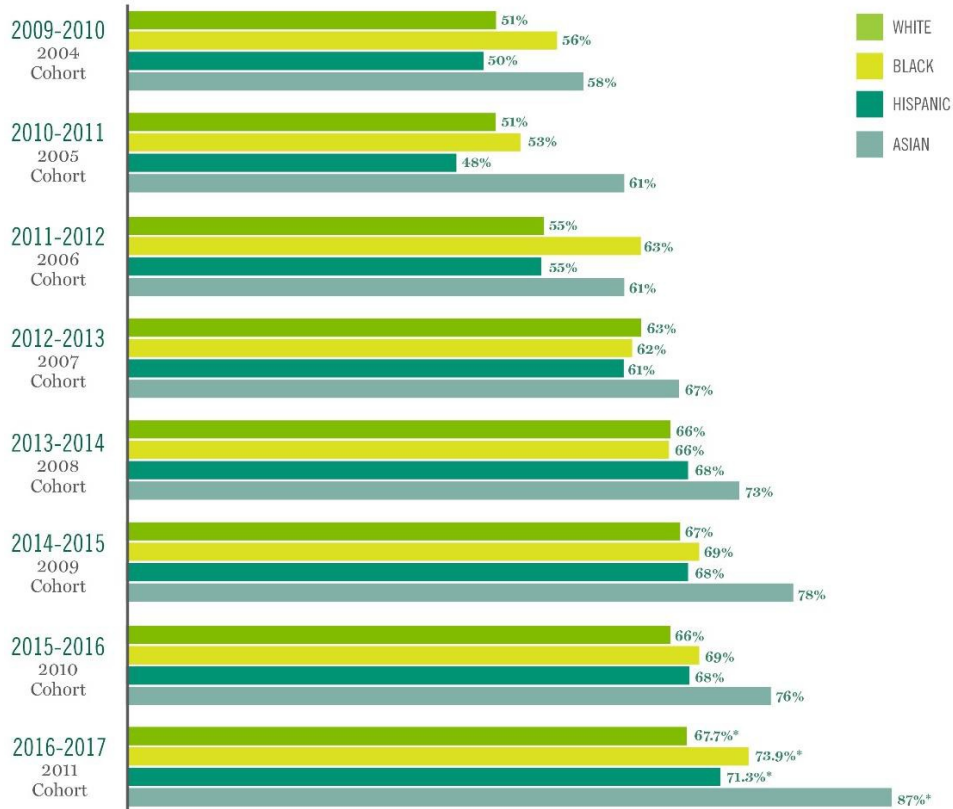


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Graph 3:

**SIX-YEAR GRADUATION RATES: RACE & ETHNICITY**



Source IPEDS  
\* Data reported follows IPEDS methodology but are based on internal preliminary data