

Analytics at University of North Texas

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1. How did your institution begin its analytics journey?

The University of North Texas (UNT) recognized the strategic value of data early on. Our executive sponsor and president, Dr. Neal Smatresk, was and remains passionate about the use of data to help transform institutions of higher education. His vision and commitment of resources in 2015 truly jumpstarted the program that exists today, the UNT Insights Program.

With the collaborative support of our IT partners, we embarked on the journey to modernize our approach to data, analytics, and information resources. Our initial goals were to respond to three mission-critical questions related to student enrollment, cost, and academic impact. These goals served as guideposts for decisions along the way and we quickly realized that data governance and data management were also going to be key components to our success.

2. How has using analytics impacted your institution?

The results for UNT have truly begun to speak for themselves. In addition to earning a CIO 100 award for innovation in technology in 2019, we have enrolled the largest class in our history and are seeing unprecedented gains in four- and six-year graduation rates. The ROI from the UNT Insights Program has already covered costs for the program and then some. (The ROI was derived from positive gains in funding associated with record retention rate improvements, outcome funding from our state for graduating more at-risk students, and the elimination of third-party contracts for services we can now do in house.)

We have numerous examples of our Insights analytics impacting grading practices, strategic enrollment management practices, financial aid processes, and the overall Institutional Research capability. Insights has grown into a trusted source of data and analytics for our 625+ trained and certified users across the campus, and over 1,000 strategic business terms are governed and documented.

This past fall, our retention rates saw growth both in first-

time in college and transfer populations and that is the ultimate outcome: more students staying on their path to achieve their dream of a college degree.

3. Considering the principle “Analytics has real impact on real people—Avoid the pitfalls,” how does the University of North Texas’s story show the importance of using data ethically?

Data privacy and integrity are hallmarks of our program. Early on, we partnered with our IT chief information security officer and our institutional compliance officer to develop an onboarding and training protocol that emphasized privacy. Each Insights-trained user must complete a mandatory training and certify that they understand the common rules of the program as it relates to data (for students, faculty, and staff, as Insights contains a diverse array of data) and how we expect users to operate. The program is also keenly aware of the impact of spurious or negative assumptions related to predictive analytics. The Data, Analytics, and Institutional Research (DAIR) team at UNT engages in vigorous and active conversation about how our work needs to be conducted and how we need to be concerned about the assumptions we make when building out our tools for the community.

4. What advice do you have for your colleagues at other institutions?

There is no single silver bullet here to be successful. Rather, embracing the concepts of the Joint Statement on Analytics as a guide, institutions should look to partner across their campus to lay a foundation for analytic adoption. We cannot stress enough how the partnership between UNT DAIR, ITSS (our IT Division), and our vendor partners made all the difference. We were also very deliberate about engaging stakeholders via a qualitative research study conducted by our Anthropology faculty, functional subject matter expert focus groups, and a campus-wide data summit. These activities informed our program charter, hiring decisions for new roles, and alignment of fiscal resources with outcomes. UNT didn't reach this level of analytics adoption overnight. Rather, we invested in a process that built us towards our goals. In the long run, our slow and steady approach helped us jump ahead.



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10 Steps to Begin Your Analytics

1. Identify your executive sponsor and ensure they are high enough within the organization to endorse and support the work.
2. Partner and collaborate with IT to break down barriers between IR and IT so that both teams can leverage what they are good at to succeed.
3. Look beyond just making data look visually appealing; have a plan to tackle data governance, data management, data science, and data modeling.
4. Conduct a campus maturity process around the state of the data – is it trusted? Is it available? Is it stuck in narrow stovepipe systems that will prevent merging to solve complex problems?
5. Be diligent when choosing a vendor partner and do not hesitate to inquire about time to market, references, and totality of solution—not just for today but for the future.
6. Grow or train new talent today. You can't afford to wait on this front. Help established IR practitioners gain new skills within the analytic landscape and bring on new talent in areas where IR may not have as much prior experience.
7. Leverage your IR team's knowledge of patterns around ad-hoc data requests to help identify early wins for analytic products.
8. Tell a story, have a communication plan, and establish a brand for your analytic program.
9. Be intentional about training and think through training resources, time, rooms, etc.
10. Be clear about your end goals and develop a program that responds to the most pressing business challenges facing your institution. Be specific and don't try to fix everything overnight.