



## CASE STUDY

# Using early alerts to help students navigate financial aid

### Georgia State University applies the power of analytics to identify and assist students in need

Too often, financial pressures force students to withdraw from their courses or drop out of college altogether. To refine its process of identifying at-risk students, Georgia State University's Student Financial Services team set out to create a system that would provide early alerts and extra insight to help staff offer the right interventions.

By applying analytics to the vast amount of data in the university's student information system (SIS), the team developed a new platform to increase students' ability to pay for their studies. This early alert system, known as the Packaging Status Promotion (PSP), grew out of Georgia State's pre-existing work with data and technology to drive improvements in student outcomes.

### Building on success

Before launching the PSP initiative, the university had just completed a large-scale effort aimed at assisting at-risk students. It analyzed over a decade of university data from its student information system, Ellucian® Banner, including tens of thousands of student records containing 2.5 million grades.



**Enrollment**  
51,000 students

**Primary Challenge**  
Grow market share with non-credit offerings  
Improve student and staff experience

**Solution**  
Ellucian Banner

**Results**  
Significant year-over-year increases in student financial readiness

Better workflows and interventions  
Increased staff availability to deliver proactive guidance to facilitate students' movement through the financial-aid packaging process

The project identified a dynamic list of 800 risk markers that, together with the university's predictive analytics advising platform, helped provide early identification of students in need of academic intervention. Each day, the university tracked every student for each of the risk factors, and advisors had more than 250,000 one-on-one meetings with students prompted by alerts coming out of the platform.

The university's innovative use of data and technology helped reduce students' average time to degree and dramatically increased graduation rates across all student populations, including historically underrepresented groups. Yet despite these nationally recognized achievements, each year thousands of students were still dropping out of school, often due to an inability to cover the cost of attendance.

Georgia State recognized that there was more work to be done. The PSP project was born, with the goal of improving university systems for identifying and providing intervention to students in financial need. The university sought to make the PSP the center of its Student Financial Services operation to support staff in their daily activities.

## How PSP works

The core technology used by the PSP is the data collected through Banner, including the Admissions, Financial Aid, Student Accounts, and Registrar modules.

Every night, the PSP extracts the data and searches through the various phases of the financial aid packaging process in order to identify students who have stalled. These phases are designated in Banner as:

1. No FAFSA
2. FAFSA
3. Verification
4. Requiring documents award needed
5. Remaining balance
6. Packaged

After passing the data through several categorization and decision algorithms, the PSP uses Robotic Process Automation and decision logic (AI) to identify workflow and outreach activities. Account maintenance alerts identify reviews or actions required as a result of changes in a student's enrollment eligibility or other activities that impact funding. Staff receive guidance on whether to engage in either an internal review or proactive, personalized outreach to students. The packaging statuses also allow the university's leadership team to coordinate across offices to create intervention campaigns that assist students at scale.

## Focusing on the FAFSA

Analysis of Georgia State student financial data suggest that students who complete a FAFSA are twice as likely to enroll the following year, so the Student Financial Services teams have focused on increasing this number.



The first-year metrics are promising:

- New students included in interventions who interacted with the university's SunTrust Student Financial Management Center (SFMC) had a FAFSA completion rate of 92.7 percent—**22.1 percentage points higher** than those with no SFMC interaction.
- Continuing students who interacted with the SFMC achieved an 87.2 percent FAFSA completion rate—a **7.1 percentage point improvement** compared to those students with no interactions.

## Real results

Now in its third semester of use, the PSP continues to evolve. Every day, the algorithms in the application become more powerful as the insights gained into each student increase both the predictive power and functionality of the application. The latest version includes a student snapshot offering a comprehensive summary of the student's account on one screen—a holistic view of the student's account that increases staff efficiency and accuracy in diagnosing problems, responding to student inquiries, and providing early intervention on issues that might otherwise prevent a student from receiving the financial aid needed to maintain enrollment.

Georgia State's data-driven approach has dramatically reshaped the internal processes and efficiencies of the offices of its Student Financial Services, including the Offices of Financial Aid, Student Accounts, and the SunTrust SFMC. The PSP has advanced the university's student financial service model from a reactive to a proactive model and has evolved its insights from descriptive and predictive data into solutions-focused prescriptive data.

The PSP has also dramatically increased the Financial Services team's ability to proactively monitor and respond to the financial status of the university's 50,000+ students on a daily basis—and, ultimately, to increase students' financial readiness and capacity to pay for college through personal finances, scholarships, grants, and/or loans.

The data insights from PSP have also improved service effectiveness and efficiency. Staff members are quickly able to identify students at financial risk and provide them with timely intervention. As a result, financial services teams are able to proactively resolve issues, and students move through a more effective and efficient financial aid process, experiencing fewer delays in funding and an improved student experience.

## Future goals and next steps

The Financial Services technology team will continue to develop the functionality of the PSP, with a focus on enabling staff to monitor how long students spend in each packaging phase—measured against a target timeline of 14–21 days to move through the entire process. This added function will give staff additional insight into students who are stalled in any phase of the process and will offer a clearer understanding of the common barriers students face in achieving financial readiness. PSP is also being adopted across the division by both the Admissions and Academic Advising teams to address other issues, such as summer melt and student retention.







## Success by the numbers

The predictive and prescriptive analytics of the Packaging Status Promotion (PSP) have revolutionized the way Georgia State University delivers student financial services and significantly improved student engagement and behaviors. In a year-over-year comparison since the launch of the PSP:

- Teams have **served twice as many students** without increasing staffing levels.
- Students who sought SFMC assistance were **20.6 percent** more likely to complete all financial-aid requirements and bring their balances down to zero.
- An additional **7,700 students** achieved financial readiness.
- Georgia State has seen a **5.6 percent** improvement in overall year-over-year student financial readiness and a 2 percent reduction in summer melt.



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