TODAY'S LEARNER
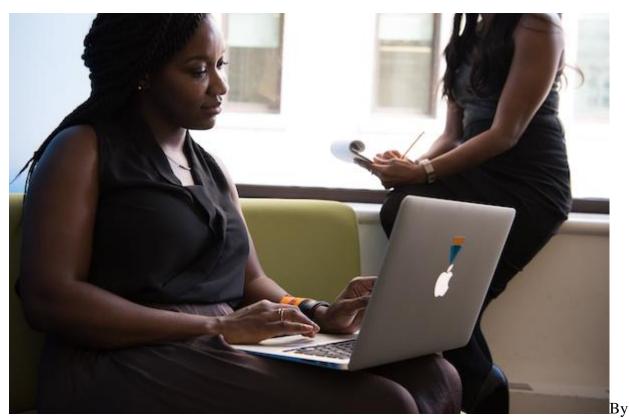
Taking Relentless Ownership of Student Success to Maximize Re-Enrollment

Shonda Gibson | Associate Vice Chancellor, Texas A&M University System

By shifting to a student-centric model, Texas A&M University Systems is tackling the dropping completion rates and breaking barriers to re-enrollment for former students.

As completion rates drop, finding effective ways to increase re-enrollment becomes critically important to higher ed institutions and the economy as a whole. In this

interview, Shonda Gibson reflects on how Texas A&M University Systems, in collaboration with ReUp, is leveraging data and creating lasting relationships to help students with some level of education return and complete their degrees.

The EvoLLLution (Evo): Why was it important for the Texas A&M University System to find a way to re-enroll students who'd stopped or dropped out of their postsecondary programs?

Shonda Gibson (SG): As a land grant system, it is our mission to find pathways to re-enrollment for stopped and dropped-out students. We have 11 universities and seven agencies across which we provide education, conduct research and offer training designed to help people in the state of Texas. As a land grant system, we truly embrace the responsibility to serve the state of Texas and one of the things I'm most proud of is that our strategic plan states that all qualified students will find a place at the A&M System. We have an array of pathways for students to pursue ambitions and interests, and once a student is accepted into one of our programs, it's our commitment to help them to persist and graduate.

Not long ago I came across a sentence that read, "We envision a system where every level of leadership takes relentless ownership of their graduates' effectiveness." So I started using the term "relentless ownership" when characterizing these projects. When it comes to re-enrollment, our intention is to peel back all the complicated layers related to student success. We're taking a very deep look at the policies and procedures in place and identifying existing barriers and obstacles. By focusing on re-enrollment, we are able to see the exact reasons why a student got derailed, patch that up and hopefully build a more successful path for completion.

We recently we had a meeting with our Board of Regents and one of the topics discussed was this awareness of the forces that are reshaping higher education. As employer expectations and student trajectories are changing, we're seeing a big shift in the demographic of students. And we know that in order for us to be responsive, we have to be open to new learning opportunities. It really goes back to our mission of serving these students. We're not just problem solvers. We have to act like capacity builders and help our students and our state become more educated and high performing.

Evo: How do you start a culture shift that will stop institutions from taking pride in a lack of degree completion and instead foster a real passion for student success?

SG: When I think of student success, I'm not talking about grades. I'm talking about learning to navigate this world. Often, the most complicated part is not the classes. These are high-quality students who were academically successful, they just ran into other roadblocks (like affordability) that stopped their progress.

I read a report not long ago that said three quarters of the fastest growing occupations in the United States are requiring higher education, but only half of the students who are starting with us finish within six years. They've got college experience, but no degree and a whole lot of debt.

The issue is that when we look at these lists of students, they are high-achieving students who didn't drop out because of a grade point average problem or a behavioral problem. These students are leaving because life happened, not because our institution is doing poorly.

What I've learned is that these students just have an overwhelming lack of awareness of how to navigate those life challenges. So our focus is on making students aware that there's another way to navigate their postsecondary experience. Talking to faculty and helping them understand that these students don't leave because they're unsuccessful or unable to learn, but because there's too many barriers and obstacles in the experience is a major aspect of this effort.

Evo: How does TAMU System's partnership with ReUp help to address these completion obstacles?

SG: Retaining students by being aware and responsive to their needs is critical and engaging with ReUp is helping us to do just that. Not long ago, we ran the data on the stopped and dropped-out students over a five-year period, and ended up with a list of about 13,000 former students. These students had high GPAs and were engaged with their studies but dropped out nevertheless.

Of course, tracking down and re-enrolling these students presents its own challenges. Over time people change locations, phone numbers and email accounts, so the information that in our SIS is often outdated. Additionally, connecting with these students is a different experience than recruiting first-time freshmen. The entire communication approach is different. We knew we needed

some help to learn how to do this better, and this is why we partnered with ReUp.

What's great about the ReUp coaches is that many of them are returned students themselves, so the conversation flows very differently from that of a recruiter trying to convince a learner to come back to school. ReUp representatives continue to connect and guide that student back through the process until they graduate and serve as a primary point of contact when issues occur. They're also working to track down all the former students who've changed their contact information to let them know that the university system is passionate about welcoming them back.

Having a very traditional university system willing to take a look at themselves and identify areas for improvement is spectacular. We are the first system to sign on with ReUp and to do such a large recovery initiative, which I am very proud of.

Evo: How challenging is it to build programs in a stackable way, where learners are earning credentials on route to a sort of degree completion?

SG: It is complex—especially in a university, where the goal is to get a bachelor's degree at minimum. However, the students who don't make it through a bachelor's degree, but go on to get some kind of a credential elsewhere are pulled off of our list. We consider them successful, because our goal is to get students down a path where they can begin making a life for themselves.

It's essential that our university system is designed to ensure that students never finish without any credentials. If they have some hours, no degree and are carrying a student debt, that's a failure for us.

We are a university system that cares. We treat our students like family. And if this was my child I would not be satisfied until I helped them get on a path where they could be successful.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

https://evolllution.com/attracting-students/todays_learner/taking-relentless-ownership-of-student-success-to-maximize-re-enrollment/?utm_campaign=EvoLLLution%20Newsletter&utm_source=hs_email&utm_medium=email&utm_content=75305060&_hsenc=p2ANqtz-_lHOWvUXpBszv3WvfCxqmaXVkzDMifISD-dMM2pL80nC8XYEtlCqeRVUf9fHhoXodCErO1Vr-9IVdTMA_md4yxjIN09Z30ISwiwVUBkSXiKk0yr7g&_hsmi=75305060