WAKE TECH'S COMPASS INITIATIVE

Because of the independent nature of online courses, students in the online learning environment often experience a sense of isolation. This sense can be even more pronounced for students from historically disadvantaged groups. Wake Tech's COMPASS project, a 4-year, US Department of Education funded research study, was designed to increase retention and success rates of students in online courses by leveraging technology and intentional outreach strategies to improve academic outcomes.

The online courses included in the project—Intro to Psychology, Intro to Business, and Intro to Computers—were selected because they are high-enrollment courses with lower than average student success rates and large achievement gaps between demographic groups. As gateway courses, they often serve as gatekeepers to student success and academic progression. Unsatisfactory student performance can prolong or derail the acquisition of credentials and increase educational costs to students.

To support unbiased and quality research results, Wake Tech collaborated with a third-party evaluation team at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. The study was designed to meet What Works Clearinghouse standards without reservations.

KEY RESULTS

- **Treatment students were less likely to drop or withdraw from the course**
  - The retention rate for all students in treatment sections was 7 percentage points higher than the retention rate of all students in control sections.
  - The retention rate for students of color in treatment sections was 9 percentage points higher than the retention rate of students of color in control sections.

- **Incremental improvements in student success rates**
  - The success rate (measured by students earning a grade of C or higher) for students of color in treatment sections was 4 percentage points higher than the success rate of students of color in control sections.

- **COMPASS had an impact on students persisting to the next academic year**
  - For students overall, the rate of treatment students that persisted to the next year was 3 percentage points higher than the rate of persistence of students overall in control sections.
  - For students of color, the rate of treatment students who persisted to the next year was 6 percentage points higher than the rate of persistence of students of color in control sections.

OTHER CONTRIBUTIONS OF COMPASS AT WAKE TECH

- **Virtual campus community**
  "Eagle Steam" is a collection of online-streamed video programs derived from COMPASS that is transforming how remote students experience campus life. The service live-streams events, including supplemental academic activities, college transfer information, interviews with local leaders, and campus extracurricular activities from arts to athletics.

- **Course gamification**
  COMPASS team members developed an award-winning gamified instructional element that proactively combats poor student engagement. The spy-themed game, entitled "Operation Graduating Gilbert," included both individual and group achievements for students who chose to participate.

- **High-quality video production technology**
  Wake Tech outfitted and opened two video production studios, which serve as free tools available to instructors and students to create videos for integration into courses. These studios afford users with little to no expertise at video production the ability to produce high-quality videos at no cost.

- **Reduced cost to students**
  COMPASS team members collaborated to implement an open educational resources (OER) textbook and develop complementary course materials. Students in the Intro to Business course were relieved of the burden of the cost of a textbook entirely, saving the online learners an estimated $360,000 annually.

- **Future college and community research partnerships**
  As Wake Tech's first randomized controlled trial, COMPASS has propelled Wake Tech into further rigorous research pursuits, a space often left unexplored by community colleges. COMPASS was the springboard for the formation of the Wake Tech Research Colloquium, which aims to create a collaborative, cross-disciplinary community that supports increased research volume and quality.

INTERNATIONAL AWARDS

- 2018 Blackboard Exemplary Course Award (one of 11 winners worldwide)
- 2019 Ellucian Impact Award (one of three winners worldwide)
- 2109 Blackboard Catalyst Award for Leading Change (one of six winners worldwide in this category)

SCALING TO OTHER COURSES & INSTITUTIONS

Wake Tech has begun scaling the COMPASS intervention to other courses and colleges, and is in the process of developing formal training modules for instructors who desire to adopt the innovative student success and retention strategies.

The project team has actively participated in opportunities to share best practices from the intervention at national conferences. COMPASS team members have delivered nearly 40 presentations at national and local conferences nationally and published nearly 20 conference proceedings and articles.

MEDIA

- More About Wake Tech's First in the World Project: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0ZATgNQpD5s
- Project COMPASS Wins Blackboard Catalyst Award: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I6hPPtHflBE
- Wake Tech added OER to one class and saved students $360K: https://edscoop.com/video/oer-cost-savings-wake-tech-community-college
- Eagle Stream YouTube Channel: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCEBpVqwu81OPkwucd3mkdKg
- Examples from the Video Production Studios: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sOQLvQz860Q

Project COMPASS was made possible thanks to support from the US Department of Education, grant no. P116F150082.