

## Next Practices: Episode 6 Cultivate a Data Literate Student Success Culture with Dr. Gene VanSickle

Katy Oliveira ([00:07](#)):

Welcome to Next practices, data-informed strategies to shape the future of higher ed. In each episode, you'll hear from transformational higher ed leaders on how they're tackling today's most pressing challenges to make a difference for their students and institutions. I'm your host, Katy Oliveira

Dr. Gene VanSickle ([00:27](#)):

Get broad input about what it is you really want to accomplish. I think that's, um, a critical starting point institutional context, institutional culture. Those are more difficult to quantify, but they, they mattered and take those into account. As you start this process, then figure out what do you wanna achieve? And then what data will help you identify the strategies or the objectives to make that happen? I think that would be the starting point.

Katy Oliveira ([01:03](#)):

Today on the show. I'm talking about how to facilitate a data literate student success culture with Dr. Gene VanSickle, Associate Provost for Undergraduate Programs at the University of North Georgia. We talk about how to transform all the data we have access to into actionable insights, how to build data literacy, how building data literacy leads to better student outcomes, how to use data to build coalitions across academic and student affairs and why it's so important to trade in reactivity for a proactive data informed approach to student success.

Katy Oliveira ([01:40](#)):

Welcome to Next Practices, Gene, thank you for taking time out of your busy schedule to share your experience and wisdom with our audience here at Next Practices, we explore how to use data informed approaches to answer urgent questions and go beyond best practices to solve today's urgent challenges and quite frankly, a quickly rapidly changing higher ed landscape with that in mind, just to give us a sense of the work that you are doing at the University of North Georgia, what are the most pressing student success challenges you and your team are currently working to solve?

Dr. Gene VanSickle ([02:18](#)):

I think the biggest thing, and this is I think common across the country is, is responding to the effect that the pandemic has had on our students. We've seen significant challenges around student success, uh, student engagement and slipping retention as well. And, and depending on the degree level, right, that's magnified a little further associate students, right. Or slipping even more. And then if you break that down, if you disaggregate that data a little further, you see that, uh, disproportionately affecting students of color students who come from low economic family contribution, those types of metrics, that's been a real challenge. How do we support our students through the chaos that the last couple of years has, has, uh, unleashed on us

Katy Oliveira ([03:07](#)):

In an earlier conversation that you and I had, we talked extensively about the importance of a taking a data informed approach that goes beyond just collecting data and knowing what's going on, but includes expanding out the use of data to make meaning of data. Can you walk me through how your team is doing that at University of North Georgia to address some of these challenges that you're seeing in light of the last few years,

Dr. Gene VanSickle ([03:36](#)):

We used different types of data. Of course we've been paying attention to, uh, success metrics that I think are probably pretty well industry standard, DFW grades. For example, we've been looking at credits attempted versus credits earned because of its importance around financial aid, right, and satisfactory academic progress. We look at that they've been paying much more attention to academic standing and the effect that this has had on, on students' ability to stay in good standing with the institution. That's one area that we look at, we're also looking at of course, you know, retention and progression rates. And beyond that, we are using data to look at ways to, to be more efficient. This environment has made resources even more important. And so how can we use data to find process efficiencies? How can we use data to better manage our schedule, right. And how we put those courses out there for students to meet their needs. And so those are a few examples and we're using that data to engage in planning, right. Um, from a strategic institutional level. But then also we're asking academic departments to do that too.

Katy Oliveira ([04:58](#)):

I know one challenge that a lot of institutions have when they are beginning to take a data formed approach is one, having everyone have a unified goal or unified process around data, what is your team doing to approach usage of data from a cross functional or collaborative perspective?

Dr. Gene VanSickle ([05:21](#)):

The thing we've been really, uh, I'll say, hyper focused on throughout this whole year of 2022 is using data to find ways to identify students earlier who might be heading for some challenges, but then also to intervene. What can the data tell us about appropriate places where we can right with limited resources intervene while it's more thoughtful, more intentional, uh, but hopefully more productive way on behalf of the students. And so when we had talked just initially about this, bringing in other data sources, right? Using our LMS in new ways, right. To do that, using things that we wouldn't have looked at before, like role verification, for example, which we require faculty to submit, that's an early indicator of, uh, a student's not starting off well, if they get dropped during role verification for non-attendance huge red flag, but that data is there and it's easy for us to access. And it's something that we feel like we can respond to.

Katy Oliveira ([06:31](#)):

How did things go before you had a strong, a strong data policy? What was the approach? Just to give a point of contrast in how a data form approach is changing, the way that you're able to respond to student needs,

Dr. Gene VanSickle ([06:44](#)):

You know, the different approaches that folks would take or units would take. It's not that others weren't using data. People, plenty of units were using data, but we weren't using it consistently. We would often use the same data set, but interpret it completely differently. That has been part of this too, is right. So data literacy and consistency in how we use that data, how we interpret that data. And I guess it's really, it's about educating right? More members of our institution and the university community about how we want to use data to support the mission. Right. And so I think that's the big shift that has taken over the last couple of years.

Katy Oliveira ([07:26](#)):

You read my mind because the other sticky challenge, besides getting a unified approach that I hear from folks, when it comes to taking a data informed approach to student success is data literacy and helping the entire institution, especially those that are interfacing with the data and making decisions, improve their data literacy. So I'd love to hear how y'all are doing that, helping to have your, your staff as a whole become more data literate.

Dr. Gene VanSickle ([07:55](#)):

It's been more, uh, more deliberate effort by academic affairs, sort of across the board. Our, uh, Associate Provost for Institutional Effectiveness has been pivotal. I want to give her credit in that regard in helping us establish sort of baseline. And then also the way that her team has been making data available to us. And so that how we access it's consistent. So there's that, there's also from the top down as we go into meetings and we think about processes on an annual basis, deliberately asking deans department heads and so forth as you work through and consider these things, make sure you're using this type of data, right. It's available. We want you to use it. I'll give you a quick example of that. One of the areas that I work with a lot is the registrar's office, right? That's our official record keeping unit. And so we notice inconsistencies and what's in, in the catalog and what's in our SIS. And so we were able to, to direct the departments, Hey, use this report. This will tell you if your data, if what you have in, in the SIS is inconsistent, right. Use this report. So this data source, it's an easy way to do that. And so we'll be really specific and say, we want you to use this one because this is gonna be the, give you the quickest results so that you can address this issue.

Katy Oliveira ([09:19](#)):

It's having policies, having conversation, having consensus about how, as a team, we're gonna approach data usage.

Dr. Gene VanSickle ([09:29](#)):

Yes, that's been a deliberate strategy. It helps to our system, uh, system, office, some of the priorities that come out of, of that level of the university system and what they ask us to do. Uh, and that's been data informed as well. We just wrapped up, uh, gateways to completion. I'm sure that a lot of folks are familiar with that, that started with data and we took the data to the faculty and here's what we're seeing. Right. And that was coming from the system level. And so we adopted those types of practices as well. And it just filters down.

Katy Oliveira ([10:04](#)):

Yeah. That's a good segue of how is this data formed approach, helping your teams innovate, go beyond best practices, used best practices, more effectively or efficiently. How is it changing approaches or informing intervention and policy?

Dr. Gene VanSickle ([10:22](#)):

There's two sides to that. The data can, can show us what we're doing well, which that's important is to see what we're doing well, what are our strengths and how do we build on them? And then the other is use the data to find those opportunities that you're referencing. And, uh, when I mentioned, right, some of the things we're trying to do around being more proactive and in working with students earlier in the semester, we're relying on the data. We, we have access to abundant amounts of data, right? We are, uh, a wash and data, uh, but which ones will help us in terms of what our goals are. I think that's another part of this too. What's the outcome you're seeking. We know that for example, the better a student

does in a freshman course, for instance. And when I say better, I'm talking about a B or an A versus a C next course in sequence the progression, if they do it. And if they have a B, right, the success rate in the next course is statistically much higher. So if we look at grades early in this semester and see students who have, uh, C for example, and then intentionally try to direct resources to them, well, along with some, you know, growth mindset messaging, that's the approach. And we're using the data to help us do that.

Katy Oliveira ([11:42](#)):

You're saying you're a wash and data. And I think that having access to data is a challenge in of itself. But just as much as understanding, making sense of the data, you can have tons of knowledge, but you have to synthesize that knowledge and then learn how to apply it. And data works much the same way. What practices, tools, strategies have helped your team make meaning of the data to take it just from information to something that you can apply. Something that is actionable.

Dr. Gene VanSickle ([12:13](#)):

I think there are multiple components to that. The first starting with the consistency in how we access and read the data. And we depend on institutional research for that. So that will be one second will be framing the conversation. And that's where the leadership, uh, is really critical. We're not telling that necessarily how to use the data. We will bring the data in. And so, as an example, we saw a huge increase in withdrawals about a year and a half ago, not a surprise, another circumstances, right? The shifting around between, on campus hybrid, fully online, right? Those quick shifts that were happening, not necessarily a surprise, but right. There's the after effect that comes from that, uh, in terms of academic standing, but also the effect that it has on students, right? Their GPA. So slipping GPAs. And if they're in, in programs that require a specific GPA, a minimum, that was one example of how we did that.

Dr. Gene VanSickle ([13:14](#)):

It's, uh, we took that to the deans, to the deans of each college and said, here's what we're seeing investigate this further. You know, what do we, think's happening here? And how can we address it? And this was particularly important for some of the professional programs, which have a high GPA requirements in your identifying students that are below that threshold, which puts them in jeopardy of not just persistence, right retention. It puts them in jeopardy of graduating and we need to intervene here. So that's the second part of that is framing that conversation. And then, you know, having trust that your teams can, can do that analysis and come back with a plan. And that's another, I think important piece of this is trusting your team to be able to, to interpret that, to analyze it, to do the research and come back with recommendations that are possible for the institution

Katy Oliveira ([14:09](#)):

And since taking that approach, what kinds of results have you seen? And it can be, you know, I think sometimes when we think results in higher ed, we're thinking increases in retention, increases in graduation rate, which are fantastic, but there's also things like accessing performance based funding or creating more efficient workflows for your teams. What kinds of things have you so far been able to achieve through this work?

Dr. Gene VanSickle ([14:36](#)):

I think, again, here, there's naturally some nuance to this. I think one of the more interesting things that I don't think I could actually quantify for you is how we are collaborating and working together across units now, especially between academic affairs and student affairs. I would say that there's been a marked shift in how we collaborate as a result of this. So that would be one metric, well, not a metric, but one, one way, I'd say that things have changed now in terms of the data. And we'll see if this is sustained or not. So we hit the pandemic, right. And we see then that dip and, uh, then everybody, then of course, you don't know how that's gonna go going forward. And so we tried to respond to what we were seeing, uh, fall 20 spring 21. And so we put the system in place to try to intervene in direct students a little sooner.

Dr. Gene VanSickle ([15:31](#)):

And so the preliminary data, and I wanna be really careful how I say this, right? The preliminary data from the fall 21 cohort, right? So we saw that dip it's coming back up. We haven't reached pre pandemic, but when I talk about the traditional success metric, right, the RPG, we haven't got back to pre pandemic levels, but it, it seems to be recovering now, is that strictly because of what we're doing, not likely is what we're doing, helping. I'm sure it is, but that's preliminary. And like I said, we'll have to see if that's sustained, uh, with our next cohort that starts here in August.

Katy Oliveira ([16:15](#)):

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Katy Oliveira ([16:51](#)):

I do wanna ask you to say a little bit more about how one of the results that you're seeing that's, it's not quantifiable, but really important is the being empowered to work together as a team. What do you think is at the source of that? What is facilitating that strengthened collaboration?

Dr. Gene VanSickle ([17:11](#)):

I think in one way, I would say it's the work ethic of the people who work at UNG. It was quite remarkable to see how they came together during the pandemic, right? When it first started, they rallied around the students now, great deal of uncertainty there. And there's a question about whether or not that type of cooperation can be sustained. Especially once things start to change. I don't wanna say we're normal. We're where we are with a lot more things on campus again. And so people who were able to pivot and redirect to support students in virtual environments and so forth. Now they're back to doing, you know, their regular jobs, but yet we all recognize the students haven't fully recovered from that either there's, um, uh, I guess, a lag effect, especially the students that started, right. So they finished high school a year and a half or whatever, you know, of high school virtually.

Dr. Gene VanSickle ([18:10](#)):

Uh, so I think that's part of it, a deep desire to just to serve the students, the realist. Okay. And part of that is also it's necessity. Look at what's happening at a national level with declining enrollments, right. The birth dearth, and the pandemic has made that worse. There's a necessity involved here too. And we

know that we have to, and I don't know about other places. Right. But the budget situation, you know, in the forecast doesn't look super great. So in those context, there's some necessity around working together that, that maybe wasn't there before.

Katy Oliveira ([18:48](#)):

Do you think having shared information and access to data and unified ways of thinking about the data is helping to facilitate that as well?

Dr. Gene VanSickle ([18:58](#)):

It makes it much easier. I certainly think that's the case. If we're starting basically from the same source of information, I think that really helps. I think we're able to get into a deeper conversation much more quickly than maybe what we would have before, because we don't have to spend as much time explaining what we think the data is. I think we've also been spending enough time together as well that we understand. And I think actually, I think I'd say appreciating value, the approach and the perspective that these team members are bringing that's, uh, I think another important variable in this is recognizing, you know, when you're working across these different units, especially between academic affairs and student affairs, there's a valuable perspective that you might not, uh, be aware of that they bring to the table. And that's been really helpful, our, our deans of students as just one quick example, by working with them about how they're trying to support students, right. They're responding to students, non-academic issues, but meeting with them regularly and hearing about what they're seeing is helping us on the academic side and trying to figure out ways to, to better support, uh, students. And then we can then present that to the faculty. And when we ask them to submit an alert on a student, trying to get them to be aware of, well, if you see this, this or this, right, here's the system we want you to use.

Katy Oliveira ([20:34](#)):

It's interesting. So it's rather than spending a huge amount of time trying to figure out what the problems are, can kind of quickly get to the bottom of the problem and start taking action and working together to start to make a difference.

Dr. Gene VanSickle ([20:46](#)):

Yes. That's a much more succinct way to put it. Yes.

Katy Oliveira ([20:50](#)):

My job here is to sum up <laugh>, you're the one who brought the great information. Well, I know that performance based funding is something that's on the mind of a lot of institutions. You mentioned resources and budget shifting in the phase of declining enrollment. And I know that being able to demonstrate measurable change and outcomes is, is an important thing that a lot of institutions are, are looking to be able to do. Is that something that your team is working on or are using these approaches to data to help with?

Dr. Gene VanSickle ([21:22](#)):

Yes. I think in a broad way, we've seen some slippage in retention and that's bachelor's or associate, which is deeply concerning. That's also something that's, it's sort of new for our institution to see the kind of drop we've seen over the course of the pandemic. And so that that's very motivating in terms of right. We know it's not just about the institution, right? I mean, that informs sort of the formula funding credit hours and the right head count and that kind of thing. But, but the same time we recognize that

we're losing students and that's who we're here to serve. And so I, I would argue there's a moral imperative here. That's, uh, driving us just as much as the financial component.

Katy Oliveira ([22:09](#)):

Yeah. The finances are there just to be able to have the resources you need to serve the students and help the students succeed at the end of the day. And so having a sense of what is working for your students, being able to intervene in a timely way to help drive student outcomes is a good thing. If you're able to have the funding you need to put back and reinvest in them.

Dr. Gene VanSickle ([22:30](#)):

One of the things we really put a lot of effort into for this year is, is focused on, right. Um, you're familiar with like 15 to finish campaigns and trying to, to get full time students to take us full a load, get us closer to that 15 credit hour mark that benefits the institution. And so far as the formula funding goes, but it's also, I think the right thing to do based on research, right? The data, um, time is the enemy. And there is an argument to be made for the momentum that students gain academically by taking a full load. Right? So that 15 hour mark. So I think we've made some progress as a result of that, but it required a strategic decision to try to push in that direction. And it's created some other challenges, making sure you have enough courses on the schedule. Uh, if you're trying to get all your full-time students to, to go for 15 and that's something we've had problems with in the past is not being able to offer enough courses

Katy Oliveira ([23:34](#)):

And offer those courses at times that students wanna take them. That's the other

Dr. Gene VanSickle ([23:38](#)):

Yes. As we're approaching August, you know, you end up with the eight and five o'clock schedule.

Katy Oliveira ([23:43](#)):

Yes. As, as classes become fewer and far between your schedule becomes a little less balanced.

Dr. Gene VanSickle ([23:48](#)):

Yeah. It's not ideal for the student.

Katy Oliveira ([23:50](#)):

Yeah. And so how can we help as many students as possible get a well-balanced schedule that's full and that can help them succeed. We've covered a lot of ground in this conversation. So I do wanna leave a little bit of time for you to share any other lessons that you've learned while taking a data informed approach to student success that you'd like to share with other leaders who are doing the same work or seeking to do the same work.

Dr. Gene VanSickle ([24:15](#)):

My advice when it comes to to data first off is to be super intentional, get broad input about what it is you really want to accomplish. I think that's, um, a critical starting point institutional context, institutional culture. Those are more difficult to quantify, but they, they matter and take those into account. As you start this process, then figure out what do you wanna achieve? And then what data will help you identify the strategies or the objectives to make that happen? I think that would be the starting



point. The other side of that coin, if you will, is don't forget, how are you gonna assess what you're doing? What data do you need to figure out if it's working? I don't know that that's necessarily that insightful, but I think if you don't do those two things, you're gonna struggle

Katy Oliveira ([25:14](#)):

Instead of taking your best guess it's using data to identify and then go from there.

Dr. Gene VanSickle ([25:20](#)):

I think a lot of times we find that we react to data instead of trying to be proactive with the data. That's something I've noticed over the last couple of years, is there for a long time. It seemed like we're just constantly reacting because, well, we saw this in the data. What are we gonna do about it? We're too late to the game. If we're reacting, how do we use the data to become proactive? I think is a critical question.

Katy Oliveira ([25:46](#)):

I know I said we were wrapping up, but that's so important. <laugh> that I'd like for you to take a minute, to say more on that. And how do you think folks can start to make that shift from taking a reactive approach to a proactive approach? Cause I do think you're right. That that's a lot of time where folks get stuck.

Dr. Gene VanSickle ([26:02](#)):

What we've been doing is thinking about right? Because like I said, we're awash in data and some of it's real time. So what systems do you have available that can provide you insights into what's happening into what the students are experiencing? You know, we don't have to wait for final grades to post. We have systems in 2022 that show us now. Yeah. Be careful. Right? Because you can end up with a lot of false positives here, but a quick metric that you can run on a regular basis is look at LMS activity. It's not perfect, but it's an indicator is a student engaged. Well, if they haven't logged in, in a week to anything, we know the answer and somebody needs to be on the phone. We don't need to wait until midterm progress reports. I don't know that that's very profound. If your LMS has those capabilities, then, then you should use them to see if a student is getting off track.

Katy Oliveira ([27:04](#)):

Yeah. It's following leading indicators over lagging. Yeah.

Dr. Gene VanSickle ([27:08](#)):

And, and it's not necessarily that you don't have to assign like a one-on-one counseling, right. With a student it's maybe you see a little slippage and so let's, let's give 'em a nudge. Hey did you know? And so that's part of our strategy. At least we're nudging, the faculty too, just general reminders. And hopefully that, that will pay some dividends. Uh, you have to get back to me after this fall on that part.

Katy Oliveira ([27:36](#)):

Yeah. And sometimes just having the data to show faculty and staff, what the data is showing is working can help with that nudging.

Dr. Gene VanSickle ([27:43](#)):



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Yes. And the other thing too, is that the faculty are gonna be the first ones to see it. If there's something like that's happening, they're the first ones who are gonna see it and getting them to tell us, I mean, that's pretty cool as well.

Katy Oliveira ([27:55](#)):

Yeah. Well thank you. I promise we were wrapping up several moments ago, but I appreciate you diving a little deeper on that point with me. Thank you so much for coming on Next Practices. I really appreciate your time, Gene.

Dr. Gene VanSickle ([28:07](#)):

I'm happy to do it. Thanks for asking

Katy Oliveira ([28:12](#)):

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