

Transcript: How an IR-Led Outreach Experiment Boosted Student Persistence at Greenville Technical College

Katy Oliveira:

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.

Kevin McMindes:

What is the impact of having one or more advising appointments? That came back to be about a 10% increase in persistence. Wow. That's bigger than any single initiative we had analyzed on our campus at the time. We were like, "Okay, this is really, really important." So we set a goal: Every student should have an advising appointment. If we can do that, we're looking at an instant 10-percentage-point lift in persistence.

Katy Oliveira:

In this episode, I'm talking with Kevin McMindes, Assistant Director of Analytics at Greenville Technical College. We discuss how Greenville Tech applies data to deliver individualized student support proactively and how Kevin's team incorporates regular initiative analysis to identify which efforts are most impactful for specific student populations. He also shares how their IR team led strategic outreach based on persistence predictions, resulting in major gains in persistence. Kevin walks us through how they developed an analysis to correlate initiative impact with ROI—giving leaders clarity on what's working, where to invest, and how to scale their student success efforts.

Narration:

Our guest today, Kevin McMindes, is the Assistant Director of Analytics at Greenville Technical College, where he wrangles data and drives institutional impact. Kevin served 23 years in Marine Corps aviation. He

earned a B.S. in Mathematics from the University of Florida and an M.S. in Operations Research from the Naval Postgraduate School. He and his wife Marni are proud parents of four Greenville Tech graduates.

Before we dive in, don't forget to subscribe to the show so you never miss the latest insights on data-informed student impact.

Katy Oliveira:

Kevin, welcome to *Next Practices*. Thanks so much for joining us and sharing how your institution is helping students reach their goals.

Kevin McMIndes:

Thank you for having me.

Katy Oliveira:

Let's get started. Can you introduce yourself and Greenville Technical College to our audience? Tell us who you serve, your mission, and your role in that work.

Kevin McMIndes:

Absolutely. Greenville Technical College is one of 16 technical colleges in South Carolina. We serve 10,000 to 12,000 students each term and are one of the largest in the state. Our mission is to impact students' lives—empowering them through education to increase economic mobility and enrich the community. We're really student-focused.

Katy Oliveira:

And what's your particular role in that mission?

Kevin McMIndes:

I'm the Assistant Director of Analytics. My title officially changed today! But I've been focused on doing data and statistical analysis on student success initiatives—finding out what's working, where it's working well, and where we need to improve.

Katy Oliveira:

Well, congratulations on your new title—that's exciting!

Kevin McMIndes:

Thank you.

Kevin McMIndes:

So I thought, you know what? At this point, I can evaluate the summer. I looked at the students we'd reached out to—259 of them. Based on our prediction, we expected about 32.5% of those students, or roughly 84, to persist. But in reality, 149 returned. That's nearly 58%—a 25-percentage-point lift or a 77% increase over the predicted rate. We were like, "Wow, this is crazy good." And all we did was reach out, check in, and say, "Hey, we're part of an outreach team, just seeing how things are going."

We asked if they were experiencing any successes, challenges, or barriers. In my emails, I'd say, "If I don't hear from you by Friday, I'll reach out on Monday." That created urgency and showed that we truly cared. When we followed up with a phone call, the impact was phenomenal. Students felt that Greenville Tech genuinely cared, and that made a difference. Again, we weren't advisors or trained counselors—just data folks doing a simple outreach. We celebrated those results and shared them widely. It got people's attention: Maybe there's something to this, both the predictive analytics and the messaging we used.

Katy Oliveira:

That's remarkable. It really shows how proactive, authentic outreach—especially when it's timely and human—can make a real difference. Instead of a generic email blast, you all zeroed in on the students who needed a little extra attention. And even though you're not officially part of the advising team, the fact that you're humans on campus showing care made a huge difference. That effect is only amplified when trained student support professionals get involved. During that pilot, did you come across students who needed deeper support? How did your IR team handle that?

Kevin McMIndes:

Oh yeah, absolutely. Some students shared registration issues or just

didn't know where to turn for help. We connected them with academic coaching and tutoring—more than just study help. Coaching helps students get better at being students. We also connected them with counseling services and other campus resources. Often, we referred them to their advisor. But we didn't stop there—we'd do a warm handoff. We'd CC the advisor and include a note saying, "Can you please reach out to the student regarding this?" That way we stayed within our scope but helped open the door.

Katy Oliveira:

Such a great collaborative effort—and so important to make sure students actually get what they need. So you ran this pilot and published the results. What happened next? How did people at your institution react?

Kevin McMIndes:

A lot of people asked, "How do we use this?" Even though we'd trained folks on parts of the Civitas Learning platform, I got calls like, "Hey, can you come train us on this?" or "Can you walk us through it again?" Many folks had heard it before but hadn't really used it. So, part of my role became convincing them that this would make their lives easier and more efficient.

For advisors, it's about increasing both effectiveness and efficiency. You can send a single message to a group of students who all need the same outreach—especially if you tailor it based on their persistence prediction. For low-prediction students, you can be more urgent: "If I don't hear from you, I'm calling." For high-prediction students, it's more like, "I'm here if you need anything." And that was backed up by research the Civitas analysts did for us. They found that having one or more advising appointments increased persistence by about 10%. That was bigger than any single initiative we had seen on campus.

So we set a goal: Every student should have an advising appointment. That alone could give us a 10-point persistence lift.

Kevin McMIndes:

We started tracking it. At first, we didn't mandate the use of Inspire, but we

realized we were missing a lot. So we did eventually require advisors to log appointments in Inspire. That helped us track everything. I pulled the data into Power BI and created a dashboard. In Summer 2024, we hit almost 109% of our goal. In Spring, we had hit only 44%. Fall was a challenge due to more students, but we still hit about 66%.

All of that momentum led to more training requests and greater focus on what actually helps students. At the end of Fall, we wanted to evaluate the impact again—this time, with everyone using Inspire and aiming for at least one advising appointment per student. So I used the Initiative Analysis tool in the Civitas Learning platform to compare Fall advising appointments versus no appointments.

The result: a 14.7-point lift. Huge.

But I wanted to dig deeper. We looked at modality—in-person versus virtual or phone appointments—and found only a 1.1-point difference. Not statistically significant. So the takeaway? It doesn't matter how you meet with students. What matters is that you meet.

Kevin McMindes:

Then our Chief Academic Officer asked me to look at something else: What's the difference in impact between staff advisors and faculty advisors? And eventually, we want to layer in budget data too.

First, I looked at persistence for students with staff advisor appointments (excluding anyone assigned a faculty advisor) compared to those with no appointment. The result? A 21.5-point lift. Off the charts.

You and I had talked earlier—neither of us had seen a lift that high. I wonder if it's the biggest we've seen in Initiative Analysis so far.

Then I looked at faculty advisor appointments. That showed an 11.6-point lift. Still huge. And it makes sense—students don't get a faculty advisor until later in their program, so they're already more likely to persist. To get a double-digit lift on top of that? Incredible.

Katy Oliveira:

Wow. Can you give us a little more context on how advising is structured at Greenville Tech?

Kevin McMIndes:

Sure. New students get assigned a staff advisor for at least their first 12–15 credits. After that, depending on their program, they may be reassigned to a faculty advisor. For general programs like Associate of Arts or Science, they may continue with a staff advisor.

Katy Oliveira:

I know you're on the IR team, but do you happen to know how the advising team is using the platform to support their work?

Kevin McMIndes:

There's been wider and wider adoption. I can track it—and in the chart I showed you where we're tracking appointments, we also list out who's at the top—who's having the most appointments. I can also drill down by school and department, so each department can ask, "Okay, who's doing really well?" Which kind of by default shows who's not adopting. That little bit of competition helps drive adoption too, which has been great to see.

With our 40X efforts, people are saying, "Let's use our predictive analytics platform. Let's use Inspire for Advisors so we can do the outreach." Then they come to me and ask, "Where are we at, and how do we use it?" One of the keys of the 40X effort is measuring where you are now, setting a goal, and then measuring progress against it.

Katy Oliveira:

It's fantastic that it's all connected. You can make appointments, see notes, build student lists—lots of helpful workflow tools. But it sounds like one of the key drivers of impact is being able to identify which students need proactive outreach and engagement, and getting in front of them—not waiting for them to raise their hand. Is that how people are organizing their work and prioritizing outreach?

Kevin McMIndes:

Yes. And as people get more comfortable with the platform, they're realizing how powerful it is to segment students—to find the ones who need outreach the most. That allows them to focus their time where it matters most. The students in the “very low” and “low” persistence categories need immediate intervention. I often use a medical analogy: they're like patients in the ER with a compound fracture or a heart attack. They need someone to step in and help right away.

Students in the “high” or “very high” categories? They're doing okay. They just need a multivitamin. Maybe some encouragement, a quick check-in. They're fine unless things start to fall apart. And they know where to go if they need help.

Katy Oliveira:

That makes so much sense—matching the right support to the right student instead of treating everyone like an emergency case. That way you use resources wisely. Next Practices is brought to you by Civitas Learning.

Civitas Learning helps colleges and universities apply their data to improve the student outcomes that matter most. Its flexible, all-in-one platform creates actionable insights and connected workflows so your team can pinpoint students at risk, explain why, take action, and evaluate impact. With adaptable analytics built for your institution and guided by higher education expertise, Civitas empowers your team to turn insight into action and help students reach their full potential. Learn more at civitaslearning.com.

In the fall, I had the honor of seeing you present on some of your work to not only measure and assess impact, but also correlate that impact to ROI on student services. Can you talk a little about that?

Kevin McMIndes:

Absolutely. As part of the Strategic Data Project through the Harvard Center for Education Policy Research, I was able to research our success initiatives. We analyzed lift in persistence and coupled it with budget data.

I looked at how much we spend per student per term. Then I matched that to the persistence lift from each initiative. We plotted the results on a four-quadrant chart. And the great news? Most of our success initiatives landed in the upper-left quadrant—low spend, high impact. That's exactly where we wanted to be.

Kevin McMIndes:

Seeing that clearly helped us make immediate decisions. For example, Brainfuse, our 24/7 online tutoring service, was really effective and relatively cheap. We'd previously capped usage at two sessions per month—but that didn't make sense. So we doubled or tripled the limit.

Same with academic coaching and tutoring—we saw the value and added more resources. The same went for our OI program. It was doing great, so we doubled capacity.

It also helped us ask important questions. For instance, why didn't Greenville Tech Foundation scholarship recipients show as big a lift as work-study students? Sure, work-study involves more money, but it's federal—not our dollars. Still, maybe a \$500 scholarship just isn't enough to impact persistence.

We also learned that in work-study, students build relationships. They meet with someone a few times a week—someone who knows the college and can say, "How are your classes going?" or, "Got an email from the registrar—what's that mean?" Those small touchpoints matter. That built-in mentorship makes a difference.

So now, the goal is to replicate this ROI analysis on a regular cycle and track whether our changes are having an effect.

Kevin McMIndes:

Next, we're working on doing a similar analysis for staff vs. faculty advising. We're identifying the budget data we need so we can tie ROI to those roles too.

Katy Oliveira:

It's remarkable. Laying everything out visually—plotting it on a chart—it doesn't just give you answers, it helps you ask the right questions. You start to see opportunities you might've missed.

Kevin McMIndes:

Exactly. At Greenville Tech, we've worked really hard to use data constructively—not to beat anyone over the head with it. We use data to get better. Don't you want to know if what you're doing isn't working? Then we can improve it.

You might've noticed one initiative sitting down in the lower-left quadrant—our Caring Corner food pantry. Why wasn't it helping students persist more? Well, there are some limitations in our SIS data. We don't have great indicators for food insecurity. And maybe \$13.95 just isn't enough to make a real difference. But that sparked good conversations—and that's what we want.

Katy Oliveira:

Right. Persistence is key, but it's not the only goal. We want students to thrive, graduate, be career-ready, finish on time. Some initiatives might impact those outcomes even if they don't show up in persistence numbers.

And sometimes it's just a matter of dosage—how much aid students receive, or when it's delivered. These conversations help you get more precise and uncover those nuances. You start painting with a finer brush.

Kevin McMIndes:

Yes, absolutely.

Katy Oliveira:

You've already shared some of your wins, but I'd love to give you space to brag a little. What kinds of outcomes are you most proud of? Maybe in terms of efficiency, improved results, or progress toward institutional goals?

Kevin McMIndes:

One big win is the renewed understanding of how important advising

appointments are. It's easy to think they're just about scheduling classes for the next term—but they're so much more.

I remember one student we reached out to. When we asked when he planned to finish, his answer didn't match his course load. Based on his credit pace, he was on track for a six-year timeline. He looked shocked—he thought it was a two-year program. And it is—if you follow the recommended course load. But if you don't, it impacts your timeline.

We helped him understand how taking one or two more classes each term could shorten his path to a credential. That conversation could change his whole trajectory.

Kevin McMindes:

So the sooner we can, the better. But we also have to balance that with our students' realities. Around 60% of students at Greenville Tech are part-time. Many are working one or more part-time or full-time jobs, and a large number are caring for children or other dependents. It's a lot to juggle. So we need to have real conversations: What's the right load for you?

Even when students withdraw from all their classes, that doesn't mean it's over. I tell our advisors—that's not a dead end. That's a chance to reach out and ask, "What happened? What's going on?" And then, "What's next? What can we plan for?" If a student has a medical issue, for instance, maybe withdrawal was the right call. But what's the plan for next term? Let's make one. Once there's a plan, there's hope. And hope builds momentum.

Then, set a reminder to follow up: "Reach out to this student on this date." Ask, "Are the two classes we planned still the right fit? Can you take on more? Or do we need to scale back?" That follow-up keeps the connection going. It doesn't take a lot—just a little effort and intentionality.

Katy Oliveira:

It's really remarkable—the level of individualized support you're able to provide at scale. It might sound like a concierge approach, but with the right data and insights, it becomes doable. It's no longer just conceptual—it's

operational. Especially for students who are juggling so much, that level of personalization can be the difference between dropping out and finishing strong.

Kevin McMIndes:

It really does make a difference. Even when we scale outreach, we can still personalize it. The platform lets us insert first names, which is great—except when a student doesn't go by their legal first name. If we know they prefer something else, we'll send them a version tailored to that name. It's a small touch, but it shows we care.

Students can tell the difference between a generic message and a real one. When it feels authentic—when it comes from someone on campus who knows them—it opens the door for meaningful conversations. That's when a student says, "I need help and don't know where to go." And that's our chance to step in and connect them to the right resources.

Katy Oliveira:

Exactly. It makes such a big difference. Thank you again for sharing your charts and visuals—if you're listening to the audio version, head over to YouTube to see the full video with all the visuals Kevin shared.

Before we wrap up, is there anything we didn't cover that you'd like to share?

Kevin McMIndes:

Just that individuals can absolutely make a difference. It doesn't have to be overwhelming. You don't need to spend 12 hours a day doing outreach. Even if you help just a few students—if everyone does a little—it adds up to something big.

Katy Oliveira:

Yes, it builds. Small, intentional actions can lead to powerful outcomes. Thank you so much for being on *Next Practices*.

Kevin McMIndes:

Thank you.

Katy Oliveira:

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