

Katy Oliveira:

Welcome to Next Practices. Today we're talking about our annual flagship research report, the Student Impact Report, which explores which student success initiatives are positively influencing persistence outcomes at Civitas Learning customer institutions. But before we dive into that conversation, take a moment to subscribe to the show to stay up to date on the latest in data-informed approaches to student impact. Today, you can see I'm joined by several of my colleagues, which I'm really excited for. They'll help share some takeaways from this year's report and talk through how your institution can use regular initiative assessment to enhance student success efforts. Thanks for joining, everyone.

Robert Freidhoff:

Thank you for having us. Hello.

Katy Oliveira:

Let's start by having each of you introduce yourselves. I'd love for you to share your background in higher ed. One of the great things here at Civitas Learning is that we have a really robust team of former higher ed professionals. Nova, let's start with you.

Nova Davidson::

Hi everyone, I'm Nova Davidson. I started my higher ed journey about 20 years ago in enrollment management and admissions, and later worked in first-year programs. My last role before joining Civitas nine years ago was leading a large advising team. Since then, I've been working with our partner institutions across a variety of tools from a strategic perspective. I'm really excited to be part of the conversation today.

Katy Oliveira:

Thanks, Nova. And Rob, do you mind introducing yourself?

Robert Freidhoff:

Yeah, absolutely, Katy. Thank you for the invite back—this is my third year in a row on the podcast, so I'm excited to be here.

Like Nova, I spent about 20 years on campus. I often say I grew up in the advising world. My first job was as a pre-med advisor—shout out to Grand Valley State, where I did that for six or seven years.

From there I moved into administrative roles in academic advising, first at Grand Valley, then at the University of Michigan where I led advising teams in their College of Engineering.

My last campus role was at a regional comprehensive in Georgia—Valdosta State—where I began with a reorg of advising and ended up serving as AVP for Student Success.

We were partners with Civitas Learning, which is how I got to know the organization. I joined the team about three years ago and currently serve as a Senior Director for Customer Development.

Katy Oliveira:

Nathan, last but not least, do you mind introducing yourself to everyone?

Nathan Miller:

Don't mind at all. Hello, my name is Nathan Miller. Like Nova and Rob, I've spent about 20 years in higher education.

My background started in institutional research and assessment. From there, I worked in a variety of institutional effectiveness roles, including as Director of Institutional Research and Assistant Vice President.

Just before joining Civitas Learning, I was AVP for Strategic Planning and Institutional Effectiveness at a regional university in Texas.

I joined Civitas about three years ago and now work on the Customer Development team, helping institutions get the most out of our solutions and driving student success outcomes.

Katy Oliveira:

Thanks so much, Nathan. I'm really glad to have the three of you on the podcast today. As I mentioned at the top of the episode, we're talking about the Student Impact Report, which we just released.

It's our flagship annual research publication, and it's something I always look forward to because it shows which student success initiatives are having the greatest impact on persistence across the Civitas Learning community.

We're able to dig into the initiative-level analysis across dozens of institutions and measure which strategies are driving real results.

So, let's start there. Rob, can you walk us through what this year's report is about and what kind of insights we're sharing?

Robert Freidhoff:

Absolutely. So the Student Impact Report is something we publish annually. It's based on an analysis of initiatives that institutions run and track in our platform—these are real student success initiatives that have been implemented on campus.

We're able to use our platform's data and modeling capabilities to measure the actual impact of each initiative on student persistence. This year's report draws from hundreds of those initiatives across dozens of institutions.

What's powerful is that we're able to identify what's working—not just overall, but in different types of student populations.

It's not just “this program worked,” but “this program worked particularly well for first-gen students” or “for sophomores in STEM majors.” That level of granularity is incredibly valuable.

Katy Oliveira:

That makes sense—and I know we've been hearing from campuses that precision matters more than ever. Nova, can you share why this kind of initiative-level insight is so important right now?

Nova Davidson:

Absolutely. Institutions are facing increased pressure to prove impact and make sure that every student support effort is delivering results.

They're having to make tough budget decisions and prioritize the programs that truly move the needle on student outcomes.

By evaluating initiatives at a granular level—by student type, major, modality, and more—campuses can make smarter decisions about where to invest and what to scale. It also allows them to stop doing things that aren't having a measurable impact.

What's really exciting is seeing institutions shift from anecdotal or gut-based decisions to evidence-based, data-informed strategy.

Katy Oliveira:

That's such a good point. I think for a long time, institutions knew they were doing a lot to support students, but it was hard to say what was really making the difference.

Nathan, could you speak to how you're seeing institutions use this data to actually take action?

Nathan Miller:

Yes, and I love this question because it's where the real magic happens. One of the most exciting things we're seeing is campuses setting up regular initiative review cycles—almost like quarterly check-ins to see which initiatives are showing positive results and which aren't.

That cadence helps institutions stay nimble. For example, one university saw that their tutoring program was effective overall, but it was especially effective for students in gateway STEM courses.

With that insight, they didn't just celebrate—they expanded targeted outreach to STEM students early in the term. That's the kind of precision that leads to real gains in persistence.

The report is full of examples like this—how data leads to action that leads to measurable student success.

Katy Oliveira:

I love that example. So let's talk about what the report found. What were some of the top-performing initiatives this year?

Robert Freidhoff:

There were several that stood out. First, academic advising showed strong results across the board again this year—which is consistent with what we've seen historically. But more interestingly, we're seeing greater impact when advising is paired with personalized outreach, like nudges or targeted campaigns. That layered approach is driving deeper engagement.

We also saw supplemental instruction and peer-led programs perform well, especially for underrepresented student groups.

And another big one was interventions triggered by early alerts—particularly those connected to LMS data or predictive signals.

These are just a few highlights, but the broader takeaway is that strategic, data-informed interventions—those that are personalized and timely—consistently outperform more generic efforts.

Katy Oliveira:

Nova, anything you'd add to that?

Nova Davidson:

Yes, I'd highlight how some non-academic initiatives are really starting to shine. For example, we saw strong results from initiatives tied to financial wellness, library resources, and even access to physical spaces like study lounges.

It's a reminder that persistence isn't just about academics—it's also about a student's environment and sense of belonging.

When institutions take a holistic view of student support, they're able to uncover powerful levers they may have overlooked before.

Katy Oliveira:

That's so true. And I think that speaks to why the initiative-level analysis is so valuable—it surfaces those unexpected insights.

So Rob, let's say a campus leader reads this report and thinks, "Wow, we want to start doing this kind of analysis too." What's the first step?

Robert Freidhoff:

Great question. The first step is simply making sure you're consistently tagging and tracking your initiatives in the Civitas platform.

That sounds simple, but it's a game-changer. When institutions log initiatives in a structured way—defining the population, timing, and intended outcomes—it sets them up for success later when it's time to analyze the impact.

The second piece is building a regular rhythm for review. That might mean setting aside time every term or quarter to look at which initiatives are being run and how they're performing.

Once that process is in place, it becomes part of how the institution thinks about student success: not as a one-time project, but as an ongoing practice.

Katy Oliveira:

That shift from “projects” to “practice” feels really important. Nathan, how does your team help institutions get into that rhythm?

Nathan Miller:

We partner closely with campuses to help build that habit. Sometimes it starts with just a few key initiatives—ones they're already invested in—and we help them evaluate the results and talk through next steps.

From there, we help them build a framework for ongoing review, including how to set up their initiative tagging, which metrics to watch, and how to communicate findings across departments.

A big part of it is also helping institutions feel confident using the data. We know data can feel overwhelming, so we work to demystify it and make sure the insights are clear and actionable.

Once a team sees how powerful those insights can be, they're usually eager to keep going.

Katy Oliveira:

That's encouraging. And I imagine once you've done a couple of these reviews, it starts to feel less intimidating and more empowering.

Nova Davidson:

Exactly. I've seen that over and over again. The first time an institution runs this kind of analysis, there might be some nervousness. But once they see the results—and especially when they find something actionable—they're hooked.

They realize it's not about judgment or proving something worked perfectly; it's about learning and getting better.

That mindset shift is huge. Suddenly, teams are more collaborative, more data-driven, and more student-centered.

Katy Oliveira:

I love that. It reminds me of how we often say: data doesn't replace expertise—it enhances it.

And when teams use their professional judgment alongside these kinds of insights, that's when the real magic happens.

So before we wrap up, I'd love to hear one final thought from each of you. What's one takeaway you hope listeners walk away with from this year's Student Impact Report?

Nova Davidson:

Mine would be: don't underestimate the value of looking closely at what you're already doing.

Most institutions have great programs in place—but when you take the time to evaluate them with data, you can find ways to optimize, personalize, and scale the impact even more.

Robert Freidhoff:

I'd say: prioritize learning over proving.

Initiative analysis isn't about showing off perfect results—it's about understanding what's working and why, so you can make more informed decisions.

That approach creates a culture of continuous improvement and ultimately benefits the students you're trying to serve.

Nathan Miller:

For me, it's all about momentum.

The schools that are seeing the biggest gains are the ones that have built regular initiative review into their rhythm.

It's not always about big sweeping changes—it's often about small adjustments that add up over time.

That consistency is what drives sustained student success.

Katy Oliveira:

Beautifully said, all of you. Thank you so much for sharing your time and your insights today.

And thank you to our listeners—we hope this episode sparks some ideas for how you can put data into action on your campus.

As always, you can download the full 2025 Student Impact Report on our website.

And we'll see you next time on Next Practices.