Track & Connect:

Increasing First Year Student Engagement, Retention and Success at the University of Sydney

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Where did Track & Connect come from?

› University of Sydney commitment to increasing diversity of student body

› Early Attrition Analysis
- Demographic indicators
- 550+ undergraduate first years leave before HECS Census

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Background: theory and practice

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› Environment Scan
   – JumpSTART from Curtin University
   – Contact with struggling students
› Motivation and Engagement
   Scale (Martin)
› Best practice research (Kift; Tinto)
› Key decision making points throughout semester
› Target 'stumbling block' units
› Combining demographic data with engagement and assessment data
› Image sourced: http://www.lifelongachievement.com/the-wheel-i7/

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Rationale

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› Proactive not Reactive
› Timely (throughout semester)
› Non-threatening
› Peer to peer
› Individualised
› Referral point

QUESTIONS? ASK ME

Asking for help is good!

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Aims

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- Bridge the expectations gap

- Empower students with knowledge

- Engage students **early**

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Faculty Role

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› Faculties provide data used to identify at-risk students:
- Academic Results;
- Attendance data;
- LMS access

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Key Decision Making Points

› Week 4 – HECs Census Date (no financial or academic penalty)

› Week 7 – Discontinue Date (no academic penalty)
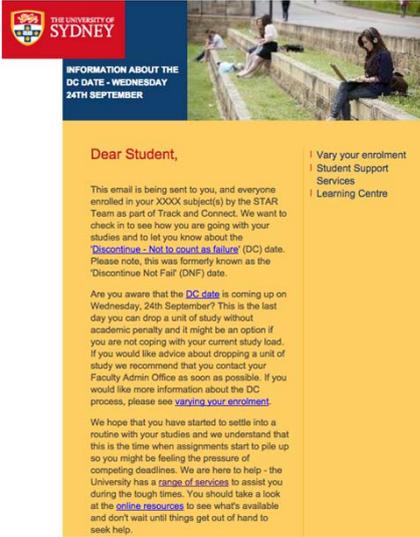
› Week 11-13 – Last weeks of semester and exam preparation

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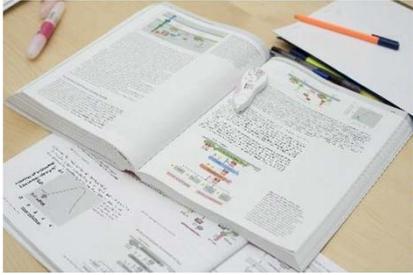
Forms of Contact

› Email (all students)

› Call 'at-risk' students:

- Results
- Attendance
- LMS log ins
- Demographic factors

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INFORMATION ABOUT THE DC DATE - WEDNESDAY 24TH SEPTEMBER

Dear Student,

This email is being sent to you, and everyone enrolled in your XXXX subject(s) by the STAR Team as part of Track and Connect. We want to check in to see how you are going with your studies and to let you know about the 'Discontinue - Not to count as failure' (DC) date. Please note, this was formerly known as the 'Discontinue Not Fail' (DNF) date.

Are you aware that the DC date is coming up on Wednesday, 24th September? This is the last day you can drop a unit of study without academic penalty and it might be an option if you are not coping with your current study load. If you would like advice about dropping a unit of study we recommend that you contact your Faculty Admin Office as soon as possible. If you would like more information about the DC process, please see varying your enrolment.

We hope that you have started to settle into a routine with your studies and we understand that this is the time when assignments start to pile up so you might be feeling the pressure of competing deadlines. We are here to help - the University has a range of services to assist you during the tough times. You should take a look at the online resources to see what's available and don't wait until things get out of hand to seek help.

ǀ Vary your enrolment
ǀ Student Support Services
ǀ Learning Centre

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Calling students

› Trained senior students

› Scripted

› Responses recorded

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Reporting

› Call Summaries – immediate feedback

› End of semester reports – program impact

› De-identified
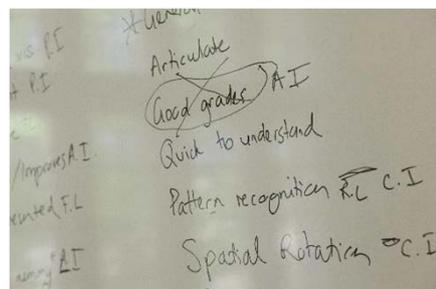
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Early Action

› Early action can enhance or constrain students' persistence or engagement (Tinto 2005; Thomas 2012)

› Commitment and resources devoted to enhancing persistence and communication of high expectations (Tinto 2012; James et al. 2009)

› Provision of financial and personal support (Tinto 2005; Adams et al. 2010, p.4)

› Formative early feedback (Tinto 2005; James et al. 2009, p.28)

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How does Track & Connect do this?

› Student-focused response that engages students on an individual level

› Immediate feedback to students and staff, with ongoing monitoring and evaluation (Kift 2008)

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Early Results – Semester 1, 2013

Quantitative results:

› Lowered rates of attrition:
  - 19% in 2012 → 7% in 2013
› Improvement in student success:
  - 67% pass rate in 2012 → 73% pass rate in 2013

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Early Results – Semester 1, 2013

Qualitative Results:

› Feedback from staff member:
  - Direct connection was extremely powerful
  - Face-to-face conversations prompted by phone calls
  - Able to devise plans to get students back on track
  - Almost all of these students did not need to be contacted again
  - Early identification meant we could stop small issues from becoming big ones.

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› Track & Connect has expanded since 2013, results indicate:

- decreasing fail rates;

- increasing submission of assessment tasks;

- rising retention across degree programs;

- higher student satisfaction scores

› Feedback from students:

- Peer-to-peer support is highly valued

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› What do students say about Track & Connect?

- Informative

- Shows genuine care and concern

- Key opportunity for students to provide feedback

- Referrals are useful and appreciated

- Comforting to know the services are there if they need them.

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Slide 17

›From student callers:

- Students end the call feeling more confident than when they started

- There is a stigma around seeking help that we can help to break down

- First years are keen to be independent

- Track & Connect helps to normalise accessing support

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Slide 18

› From the faculty:

- Welcome this type of union of academic teaching and student support

- Does not impose additional workload on academic staff

› Information Seminars recently introduced for interested faculty members

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Financial Impact

› Projected loss from annual first year attrition: estimated at over **$7 million**

› Average investment in recruiting an individual student: **$14,000** before they step on campus (Adams et al. 2010)

› The total cost of Track & Connect is easily offset by the savings from increased retention

› Financial benefits also extend to students

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Challenges

› Expansion to 24 units of study in Semester 1, 2014

› Manual data collation and analysis

› Human resourcing – recruiting and training suitable student callers

› Spatial resources – office space, phones and computers

› Rostering for on-time contact

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What have we learned?

- Discipline-specific assumed knowledge or competencies
  - Mathematics
  - Language Proficiency
- Discipline-specific indicators engagement and academic progress
- Demographic differences between cohorts in different disciplines
- Postgraduate units of study
  - Demographics of cohort
  - Needs of cohort

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Things to consider

› Longitudinal studies on our impact
- Track & Connect call
- Demographic indicators
- Universal student transition experience

› Impact of participation in Track & Connect over academic career

› Feedback loop between students and faculties
- Formative assessment
- Optimising unit of study selection
- Pedagogical enhancements

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Recognition

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› Vice Chancellor's Award for Support of the Student Experience 2014

› *Review of Student Retention Evaluation Practices* (Hanover Research, 2014)

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References

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