

By Paul Caron

New York Times op-ed: Blowing Off Class? We Know, by Goldie Blumenstyk:

Has their attendance slipped? Have they stopped logging in to read course packets or file assignments? Did they just drop the very class they needed for their major?

Tools developed in-house and by a slew of companies now give administrators digital dashboards that can code students red or green to highlight who may be in academic trouble. Handsome “heat maps” — some powered by apps that update four times a day — can alert professors to students who may be cramming rather than keeping up. As part of a broader effort to measure the “campus engagement” of its students, Ball State University in Indiana goes so far as to monitor whether students are swiping in with their ID cards to campus-sponsored parties at the student center on Saturday nights.

The university has taken to heart studies that say that students who are more engaged with college life are also more likely to graduate. When a student's card-swipe patterns suggest she's stopped showing up for clubs or socials, a retention specialist will follow up with a call or an email to see how she's doing. ...

Big Brother-esque? Perhaps. But these “big data” developments have the potential to cut the cost of higher education for students and their families, as well as for taxpayers. Deployed properly, the tools could help millions of low-income students navigate the academic and financial hurdles that often derail first-generation college students. A new University Innovation Alliance of 11 large public universities is seeking to do just that. The alliance, announced in September and backed by a half-dozen major foundations, will use data analytics in its first set of projects, which are aimed at improving graduation rates for needy students. ...

No doubt some of the interest colleges are showing in big data comes from the pressures of a national accountability movement that is demanding better graduation rates and more financial efficiency, a development reflected in the White House “summit on college opportunity” that is set to take place on Thursday. ...

Colleges face no shortage of challenges these days: a skeptical public, fragile business models, stratification of students by income, and uncertainty of government financial support, to name just a few. Data solutions can't and won't save higher education from all of that, but they could certainly put colleges on the right path.



http://taxprof.typepad.com/taxprof_blog/2014/12/big-data-track-student-performance-.html

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