

The Power of a Flexible Partnership

*Working closely with an adaptable strategic partner
can help colleges and universities spur growth and
address changing market needs*

WILEY

EDUCATION SERVICES

When college and university administrators consider entering into a partnership with an outside organization, they often seek a relationship that offers a broad range of services and solutions. Traditionally, these types of partnerships help institutions recruit and retain more students while enhancing the learning experience.

But an ideal partner can offer even more than that. A particularly well-attuned partner can help institutions stay on top of the endless changes in today's fast-moving, intensely competitive higher education market. A strategic partner not only helps design education solutions that enable learners to build their skills and improve their knowledge base—but connects employer needs in the work force to those solutions. An ideal partner will offer a strong base of support, and also maintain a high level of flexibility, so that it can continually offer ways to help institutions, and ultimately the learners they serve, succeed for the long-term.

When institutions seek an outside partner, it's important they select one with know-how and a proven record of keeping student success at the center of what they do. Wiley is a global leader in higher education services, one that brings with it over two centuries of experience. Supporting nearly 70 partnerships with colleges and universities worldwide, Wiley Education Services has also

developed flexible partnership options, including the ability to offer specific services on a per-project basis, such as by designing courses or providing help with market research projects.

Extensive experience in the field has taught the company that there are as many paths to growth and success as there are colleges and universities. Wiley Education Services has worked with all types of institutions — from top-10 universities to regional private and public colleges — each with its own unique set of needs, mission and vision. Wiley has stressed the need to remain flexible in assessing the right combination of services and solutions to help their partners address those needs.

"It all starts with a dialogue to understand what partnership looks like, and to ensure alignment on that vision, on all sides," says Todd Zipper, president of Wiley Education Services. "We ask 'What are the objectives for the college or university? What challenges do they face? How might our solutions help solve those challenges?' Once we understand their needs, we begin to define the structure of the partnership, together."

The following stories recount how "true partnership" with Wiley has helped three institutions succeed in an increasingly challenging higher-ed landscape.



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AT UTICA COLLEGE, PARTNERING FOR STUDENT SUCCESS

During times of change, colleges often seek advice on how best to bring in and serve their students. By creating relationships with higher-education experts, institutions can develop fresh ways to find the people they need to fill their classrooms, keep them engaged until graduation, and, perhaps, serve their needs as lifelong learners. Sometimes, those relationships can bloom into true partnerships, ones continually made stronger as institutions and outside experts regularly and consistently solve problems together.

In 2004, Utica College, a private institution in upstate New York with 5,000 students, decided it could use some help to deal with a downturn in enrollment that had begun several years earlier. Formerly a branch of Syracuse University, Utica had long prospered in large part because of the large numbers of students that came to it from a nearby Air Force base. But once that facility closed, stanching the flow of students, Utica began an uphill battle to find replacements.

Utica decided to look for them in entirely new places. “We recognized that we really needed to be strategic,” says Polly Smith, senior vice president for market innovation and new ventures at Utica. “And that meant seeking out new students largely via online education.”

To make the necessary transformation, Utica’s leaders got in touch with several companies that

provide comprehensive online education services. They wanted a partner that could not only give them an edge in managing their online portfolio, but also reach more prospective students.

They eventually chose Wiley Education Services to serve as the college’s online program manager, entering into a full-service tuition-revenue-share arrangement. Throughout the partnership, the college and Wiley have carefully monitored the engagement of online students, to ensure they would persist and succeed in the programs.

“Online programs often struggle with retention,” says Smith. “As we renegotiated our agreements with Wiley over the years, we made student retention a strong focus.”

Utica, an independent institution since 1995, particularly benefits from two facets of Wiley’s recruitment and retention strategies: behavioral analytics and student-success coaches. Analytics systems instantly create data during a recruitment phone call based on a student’s speaking patterns. That information, relayed rapidly, can give colleges some insight into a student’s personality type, better equipping recruitment and retention teams to ask more personalized questions and give students better and more timely answers.

The analytics that underpin Wiley’s enrollment-management services have become a very powerful recruitment tool for its college partners

overall, increasing institutions' conversion rate — from the time of the first conversation with a prospect to a completed college application.

Additionally, Wiley's marketing expertise affords colleges the opportunity to reach new audiences of prospective students, as well as tap existing markets in novel ways. "Wiley has access to digital advertising and marketing channels that Utica alone couldn't reach," Smith says. "This helps us build our overall brand recognition."



Polly Smith

Behavioral data can also be used to improve a college's retention rate. Student-success coaches — people hired and trained by Wiley to monitor a student's progress through the semesters — have information at their fingertips that shows when students might be falling behind, missing coursework, or possibly planning to drop out.

Wiley's success coaches have undergone rigorous preparation. They earn bachelor's or even master's

degrees and are given months of hands-on training — something that has impressed Utica's leadership. "Wiley's recruitment of coaches is both timely and intense," Smith says.

These days, Utica program leaders partner with Wiley coaches to be sure that they have all the tools they need to keep tabs on a student's progress.

While Wiley has created "escalation points" — metrics on financial aid, registration, log-in attempts, and grades — that can trigger a response from the success team. Utica's individual program leaders make the call on when and how interventions will be handled.

"The success of the support team relies heavily on the communications and collaboration between a Wiley success coach and a program director at Utica," says Smith.

The efforts by the partnership, which encompasses 16 academic programs at Utica, have increased online retention rates by 10 percent, year over year. Nine in 10 of the college's 2,000 online students at Utica can expect to stay until graduation, if current trends hold.

The long-term partnership continues to grow. Utica's strategic planning includes reaching students long after they have earned a degree. The college will step up its approaches to graduates, giving them the chance to further their education and possibly upskill for their jobs through non-degree programs, such as certificate programs. Wiley will be an integral part of that plan.

"Wiley has market expertise on the online market and adult-learner experience that is invaluable," says Jeffery Gates, Utica's senior vice president for student life and enrollment management.

"What's most important to us is the relationship that we've developed over time," adds Smith. "We might make it sound like all this coordination is simple, but it's not. A lot of it is attitude. We'll face things that don't go quite right, and yet Wiley people and Utica people will work together to make them better. There's a real spirit of cooperation — and partnership — that makes this all work."



AT CONCORDIA, ST. PAUL, A PARTNERSHIP MEANS GROWTH

Small colleges can often feel as though the walls surrounding them loom ever higher. With a downturn imminent in the number of available students ages 18 to 22, smaller institutions are now scouring the landscape for ways to guarantee their own futures. Campus leaders have been forced to ask themselves tough questions: How can an institution with relatively limited resources compete with larger institutions for fewer students? And how can they plan for a future when the supply of the very people they serve is threatened?

A decade ago, even before student demographic anxieties took hold across the nation, leaders at Concordia University, St. Paul, a private Christian university in Minnesota, noticed that those walls were closing in. Its student body enrollment was just short of 3,000 and its recruitment efforts weren't keeping pace with its desire to grow.

"We were in a bind," says Eric LaMott, chief operating officer and provost at Concordia. "We needed more quality talent and labor to be effective and to scale up."

Concordia sought expertise from outside. Although some other companies had managed parts of its online operations, the university entered into a large-scale partnership with Learning

House (now Wiley Education Services), one that represented most of its online programs. Wiley immediately worked to reinvigorate Concordia's growth-centered areas, including enrollment management, marketing and market analysis, and student retention.

Wiley's marketing experts put a focus on identifying growth opportunities. They used the company's analytical capabilities to find overlooked workforce education sectors that could be converted into online programs. They assessed local, national, and regional data to find areas where career professionals — potential students — might be in need of additional upskilling. They informed Concordia, St. Paul officials when other colleges had already saturated certain education markets. And they combined data from their own reports with those from outside sources to learn how the university could meet workforce needs.

"Wiley continues to help us learn and understand the skills needed to be effective in the field," LaMott says. "From there, we funnel their insights to the program level, where we assess and feather those insights into our curriculum."

The partnership expanded further through a relationship with Advancement Courses— a product offering by Wiley—which includes self-

paced continuing education courses for teacher advancement and recertification.

“We have devised these courses in partnership with Wiley, especially vis-à-vis the workforce” says LaMott. “Part of the idea is that we can grow by helping people improve their work skills. But we also want them to consider us if they are looking to embark of a path toward a degree.”



Eric LaMott

In the process of partnering, the company has made itself a part of campus. Several Wiley experts work at the university, collaborating closely with Concordia’s leadership, faculty, and staff to design courses and make sure online programs run smoothly.

“Just like our people, Wiley believes that we’re all employees serving one customer — the student,” LaMott says.

The tightly integrated approach has yielded results — and hope for Concordia’s future. The

university recently celebrated its ninth consecutive year of enrollment growth — this during a time when that kind of growth for small institutions has hardly been typical. In the past decade, Concordia has seen its student body increase to more than 5,000. Its current strategic plan, drawn up with the help of Wiley marketing data, shows that Concordia can comfortably add up to 2,000 students. When enrollment reaches that point, about half of the total student body will be taking online courses.

The partnership between Wiley and the university’s online operation, which now comprises 40 academic programs, has been the key to growth, LaMott says.

“We’re able to do things with professionals that we could never do on our own,” LaMott adds. “The partnership allows us to bring in top-of-the-line higher education expertise. Simply put, we couldn’t scale up without the partnership. It’s been transformational.”

The depth and quality of the relationships between the university and the company often transcends typical business arrangements. For example, when a Wiley employee who had worked with Concordia moved from Minnesota to Colorado for family reasons, he didn’t stop recruiting on behalf of the university. He started recruiting students to Concordia from the Mountain West. The university now boasts dozens of new students from the region.

“I see what we have as more of a symbiotic partnership than a vendor relationship,” LaMott says. “It’s a relationship based on people.”

And that relationship has put Concordia, St. Paul on an entirely new footing.

“Given what the industry is like now, some of us might ask, ‘Would we even be here if we hadn’t partnered with Wiley?’” LaMott says. “If we hadn’t, we’d be smaller. We wouldn’t have the leverage to get out in front of things. And we might be on the same chopping block as a lot of smaller schools that couldn’t make the tough decisions to invest in new ways of delivering education.”



AT NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY, SHAPING A PARTNERSHIP TO FIT

To deal with the twin challenges of making more of their academic courses and programs available online and maintaining a high level of service for the students who take them, many colleges and universities have hired outside companies to run the bulk of their online operations.

But sometimes the traditional tuition-revenue-share arrangement — an all-encompassing online program management (OPM) plan — doesn't suit an institution's specific needs. Universities can benefit by joining forces with a company partner that can provide them with an array of options. By giving institutions the chance to pick and choose the services and tools they need to help them grow, a partner can help an institution maximize its online operations and enhance the ways it can serve its students — and all while adhering to an institution's financial plan.

That level of flexibility sold Northern Illinois University on Wiley Education Services. Last year, as university leaders looked to increase its existing online program enrollment as well as add new programs to NIU's online portfolio, they recognized that online students might not be afforded the same level of help and outreach as students taking traditional courses. What's more, the university's approach to online recruitment wasn't

keeping up with competitors.

"As we considered partnering, we saw how sophisticated online student recruitment and support services are today," says Jason Rhode, executive director for extended learning at Northern Illinois University (NIU), a public institution in DeKalb that serves 16,000 students. "We saw an opportunity to transform our online recruitment and support efforts, as well as reconfigure our core online program support structure."

Among other things, NIU leaders wanted help with recruiting and retaining more online students. They wanted a partner who could help the university improve its marketing approach to prospective students, as well as help current online students maintain a high level of engagement with their coursework so they would keep at it until graduation.

Early last year, the university engaged in a request for proposals from potential third-party vendors to provide the needed additional support services in an unbundled, fee-for-service model. Wiley was selected, offering not only the most comprehensive list of services and flexible options, but also the best price for the services needed.

Even before the partnership launched in fall 2019, Wiley's team got to work providing NIU with

the marketing expertise it desired. The company delivered a preliminary market analysis on the best opportunities for online growth, especially in terms of programs. “They would tell us when we weren’t in the best position to succeed,” Rhode says. “They kept the best interests of the institution in mind.”



Jason Rhode

Once Wiley’s marketing campaigns launched in market, they began to fuel a strong pipeline of potential students interested in NIU’s online programs. The recruitment team was then able to identify and nurture these prospective students, supporting them through the application process. Once each application is complete, a file is passed to the university to make the acceptance decision.

Wiley has also fulfilled NIU’s request for help to hone their online student services. Wiley employees now comprise NIU’s online support team and, augmenting NIU’s advising team, offer course scheduling and coaching support. The mesh of the partnership is seamless: Wiley team members are outfitted with the same campus email addresses as NIU employees and are seen as part of the team by both campus professionals and students.

The NIU/Wiley team is planning to continue to expand the partnership, identifying additional programs to make available online as well as opportunities for further optimizing existing online programs for enrollment growth. Together, NIU and Wiley are working to make online offerings more “student friendly,” Rhode says, implementing process improvements and program format adjustments, such as sequential eight-week-long courses that are less disruptive to the lives of students with jobs.

Their alternative partnership model, with its à la carte menu of services, has allowed for such growth.

“A few years back, we had thought about doing an OPM tuition-share agreement,” Rhode says. “But we decided we wanted the flexibility and to see how our online services would evolve. That way, we’d have the opportunity annually to see what our goals are and where we would need to move forward with a partner.”

Wiley understood the university’s need to grow, as well as their reasons for not wanting to pursue a tuition revenue share agreement.

“We explained what we wanted, and Wiley brought us their full menu of services,” Rhode adds. “Wiley provides the expertise, resources, technology, and tailored services to help us meet market needs, increase enrollments, and support the entire student journey.”

A Belief in the Value of Partnerships

Each of these institutions note that they came to partner with Wiley Education Services at a time when they had developed a mindset—a “cultural readiness”—that sought positive change in reaching and supporting their students.

These colleges and universities have benefitted from not only the breadth of services and support Wiley has to offer, but also the ability to structure a relationship that best fits their needs.

“Our relationships work best when we are true partners, and when Wiley isn’t considered merely to be a vendor,” says Tara Murphy, the company’s Regional Vice President for University Partnerships. “We thrive in a dynamic where there’s open dialogue and where we can evaluate success together.”



To learn more about partnerships with Wiley Education Services, visit edservices.wiley.com.

The Power of a Flexible Partnership was written by Michael Anft, contributor, The Chronicle of Higher Education

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