

PURDUE UNIVERSITY ONLINE

Strategic Transformation and the Launch of the MSAI Program



I. Institutional Overview

Purdue University is a large, public, land-grant research institution located in West Lafayette, Indiana. With a total enrollment of over 58,000 students, including over 44,000 undergraduates and nearly 13,000 graduate students, Purdue has steadily expanded its digital footprint in higher education. As of Fall 2024, the University had over 4,700 students enrolled in fully online programs—nearly quadrupling since 2015. Purdue University Online (PUO), the administrative arm overseeing online learning, supports the University’s mission by offering high-quality, scalable, and flexible education that aligns with the institution’s brand of excellence and innovation.

II. Organizational Structure and Strategy

Purdue University Online reports to the Executive Vice President and comprises four primary functional teams:

- **Operations and Student Experience:** Leads recruitment, admissions, advising, coaching, program management, finance, data, reporting, compliance, and new program development.
- **Marketing and Communications:** Builds and manages the university’s online brand through strategic storytelling, digital implementation, visual design and public relations to attract and engage learners.
- **Growth Catalyst:** Leads the growth of online and professional education portfolio through academic, business, and military partnerships, including fostering the academic vision of large interdisciplinary programs.
- **Teaching and Learning Technologies:** Includes instructional design, innovation, and learning management system support.

PUO offers a wide array of programs—doctoral degrees, master’s degrees, certificates, and professional development courses—many of which are stackable, creating clear learner pathways. Their offerings serve adult learners, working professionals, and lifelong learners.

III. Strategic Plan and Pre-Implementation Challenges

The strategic implementation officially began in July 2023 with new leadership. Prior to this, Purdue University Online had grown organically but was limited by inefficiencies and systemic barriers:

- Program development was faculty-driven, often lacking market alignment.
- Internal processes for new program approvals were disjointed and prolonged, averaging 24+ months.
- Increasing online enrollment strained administrative systems unprepared for alternative academic calendars. Internal infrastructure and institutional policies did not promote scalability of both new and existing programs.

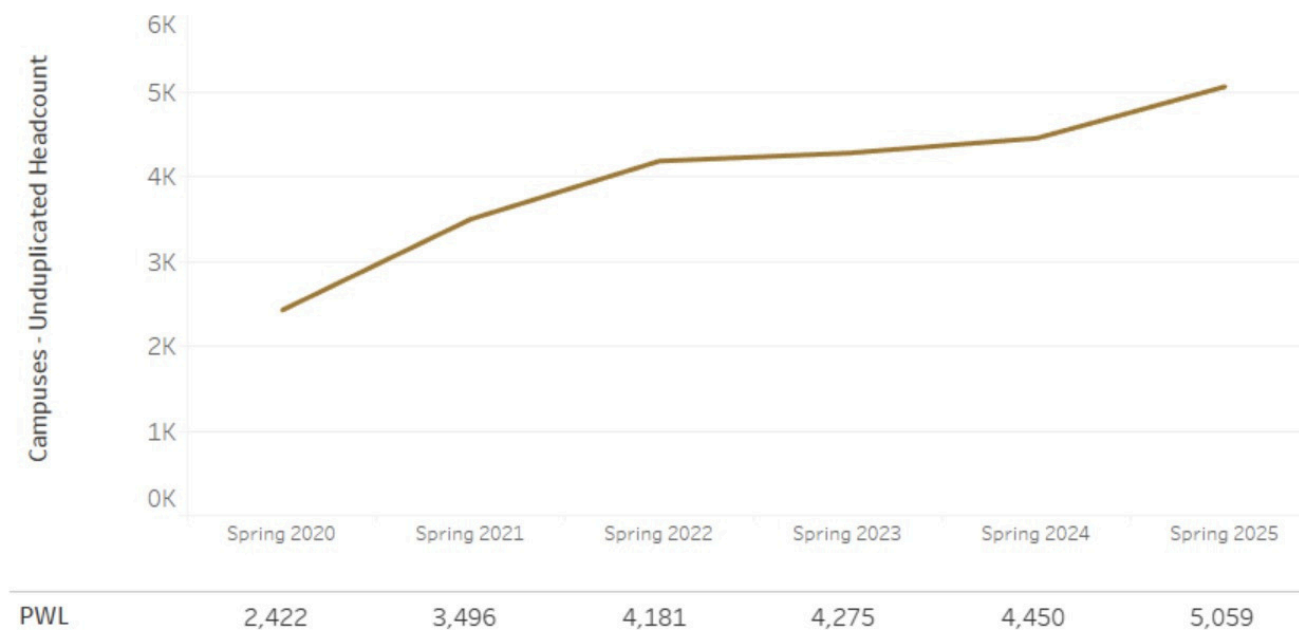
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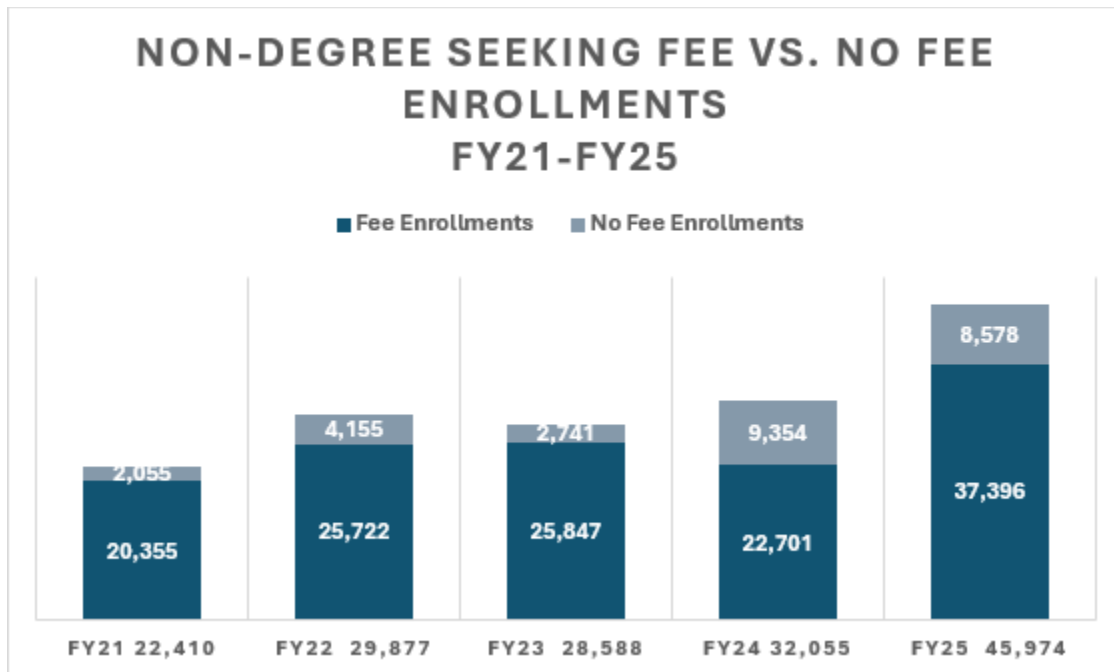
A. Key Metrics Prior to the Implementation

Enrollment:

Total online credit enrollment based on spring term-end data.



Professional development (non-credit) enrollments, FY 2021 – FY 2025.



Staff or operational metrics:

- New degree proposal approval timeline
 - Fall 2023: 24+ months
 - Fall 2024: 4–6 months

IV. Strategic Implementation and Transformation

Through 2024–2025, Purdue executed a transformational shift across key areas:

A. Process Redesign

A significant breakthrough was achieved by establishing an campus-wide administrative proposal review team. This cross-functional initiative streamlined approvals by:

- Reducing proposal types from 30+ to 12
- Aligning approval calendars
- Introducing a front-loaded review step to eliminate delays

As a result, average degree approval times dropped from 24 months to 6–9 months. The MSAI program was approved in just 4 months—an institutional record.

B. Data-Driven Program Development

The new strategy reversed the old reactive model. Now, PUO identifies market opportunities through forward-looking research methods, such as:

- Supplementing Lightcast data with real-time tools like SEMRush, Google trends, and ChatGPT
- Benchmarking across institutions and industries
- Mapping program frameworks and outcomes before engaging faculty
- Predictive Enrollment models that consider both student demand and competitive enrollment factors

The MSAI program—targeting both “AI Builders” (technical) and “AI Translators” (non-technical business professionals)—was born from this proactive model and executed with strategic faculty engagement and incentivization. The program’s structure was inspired by an external corporate labor market report.

C. Technology and Efficiency

PUO invested in technology and CRM systems to maintain a high-touch, personalized student support model while improving scalability. Staff now use:

- AI-driven tools for advising and recruitment
- Expanded email journeys and text campaigns to improve engagement and yield
- Universal use of CRM tools across functions to replace remaining manual spreadsheets

D. Organizational Design

A matrix structure enabled centralized coordination without full centralization. PUO could marshal resources from across all 10 colleges and deploy fractional FTEs efficiently. This approach helped create supporting infrastructure ahead of enrollment-driven revenue.

V. Outcomes to Date

- **Enrollment:** Online graduate enrollment surpassed residential; MSAI became the largest launch in PUO history.
- **Efficiency:** Approval timelines decreased by over 75%; operational strain alleviated via staffing and technology investments.
- **Innovation:** Purdue created 13 non-degree micro-credentials around the MSAI program, 10 of which were ABET-QA Certified, the first such recognition of their kind in the United States.
- **Reputation:** Purdue reinforced its image as a leader in scalable, mission-aligned, tech-forward education.

VI. UPCEA's Influence

Purdue University Online's engagement with UPCEA played a pivotal role in informing and inspiring the transformation of the MSAI program, despite UPCEA not being directly involved in the research and consulting process:

- Attended UPCEA conferences and sessions featuring insights from national experts.
- Engaged with benchmarking studies and sector reports.
- Leveraged recommendations and feasibility insights from previous UPCEA work on other programs (e.g., MS in Communication).
- Benefited from a neutral, third-party lens UPCEA provided on earlier program analyses, including certificate recommendations implemented in 2025.

These connections helped inform Purdue's shift toward more strategic, data-informed, and student-centric decision-making.

VII. Lessons Learned

A. Top Lessons:

- **Early Partnership Matters:** Inviting campus stakeholders into the process early fosters buy-in and accelerates change.
- **Technology Isn't a Quick Fix:** Tools require investment, thoughtful design, and ongoing support.
- **Pace and Communication:** Rapid growth requires improved forecasting, transparency, and consistent cross-unit communication.

B. Mistakes to Avoid:

- Entering the market without rigorous launch readiness caused inconsistencies. Purdue has since reevaluated its launch playbook.

C. Surprises:

- The MSAI program's rapid success exceeded projections, with a robust interdisciplinary model and record-breaking scale.

D. Looking Ahead: 2025–2028

As we have learned in 2025, there is a significant amount of uncertainty in the higher education landscape. Online education will continue to be a strategic priority for the University, and we are looking for opportunities to grow. Our approach will leverage growing current program enrollments, evaluating new online program opportunities, and forging business and military partnerships. Purdue University Online is developing strategies to assess market trends looking forward, as existing market research tools leverage conferral data as a primary data point, which lags by two years. Purdue University Online is looking for ways to forecast “the next AI” through innovative approaches including Google search volume analytics and staying current on market trends across disciplines. For example, we’re looking at ways to connect with new audiences using Sunnie, BBC, and Google–AI driven audience development to expand the reach of our online programming. We continue to look for programs that are built on Purdue’s strengths and align with strategic institutional priorities.

- **Growth Areas:** Scaling existing programs, expanding industry and military partnerships.
- **Strategic Priorities:** Building predictive market analytics to identify “the next AI”; enhancing internal capabilities to match external demand.
- **Innovation:** Deepening the non-credit-to-credit ecosystem, aligning offerings with employer needs, and continuing to refine infrastructure and governance for speed and agility.

