

UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA – ARIZONA ONLINE

**Online**

USING AI TO EXPAND PROACTIVE STUDENT SUCCESS OUTREACH

This case study examines how the University of Arizona's Arizona Online unit piloted an AI-enabled student success workflow to improve proactive outreach, personalize student communication, and increase staff capacity.

The initiative demonstrates how AI can support advising and student success operations when paired with human oversight, cross-functional collaboration, and intentional change management.

INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

The University of Arizona is a public, research-focused institution based in Tucson, Arizona, serving a large and diverse student population across campus-based, online, and distributed learning pathways. Arizona Online offers accredited online bachelor's, master's, doctoral, and certificate programs, with online students earning the same credentials as campus-based learners.

Arizona Online operates within a broader institutional strategy that views online education as an important access, growth, and student success initiative. Its portfolio includes programs in business, health, education, technology, public service, and the humanities. The student success unit involved in this pilot supports a large online learner population using a coaching and engagement model designed to improve persistence, academic progress, and student engagement.

THE CHALLENGE OR OPPORTUNITY

Arizona Online faced a common challenge among institutions serving adult and online learners: the need for highly personalized student support at a scale that exceeded existing staff capacity. Student success coaches were responsible for large caseloads, approximately 1,200 students per coach, and often needed to manually gather information from disconnected systems, including the student information system (SIS), learning management system (LMS), and customer relationship management platform (CRM).

The team wanted to intervene earlier with students showing signs of academic or engagement risk, such as missed logins or academic difficulty. However, fragmented systems and manual workflows limited the team's ability to prioritize outreach efficiently and provide timely, individualized communication.

THE AI USE CASE

Arizona Online piloted Risely AI within its student success operations to support proactive outreach and improve workflow efficiency. The platform aggregates student data from multiple institutional systems into a single interface and applies a risk model to identify students who may require attention or outreach.

The AI-supported workflow was designed to assist—not replace—student success coaches. Staff continued to review, edit, and send all outreach communications. Rather than automating relationship-building, the tool augmented staff work by helping coaches identify at-risk students, understand relevant context, and draft more personalized and timely communications.

The pilot emerged through a partnership between Arizona Online and the university's IT division, which was interested in testing the platform's ability to integrate institutional systems and improve actionable student success workflows. Arizona Online was selected as a pilot partner because of its willingness to experiment and the scale of its student success operation.

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IMPLEMENTATION AND DELIVERY

The pilot moved from planning to launch over an approximately 10-week implementation period. Program leaders emphasized that successful deployment depended not only on the technology itself, but also on change management, staff training, and strong cross-functional collaboration.

- **Cross-Functional Partnership:** Arizona Online leadership, student success staff, university IT, and Risely personnel collaborated throughout implementation and testing.
- **Integrated Student Data:** The platform combined information from the LMS, CRM, and SIS into a unified workflow designed to improve visibility into student risk indicators.
- **Human-in-the-Loop Review:** Student success coaches retained responsibility for reviewing, editing, and sending AI-generated outreach messages.
- **Training and Early Access:** Staff participated in an early preview period, weekly office hours, and testing activities to build familiarity and trust in the platform.
- **Workflow Redesign:** The pilot shifted staff time away from manually locating information and toward prioritization, judgment, personalization, and follow-up with students.

RESULTS, BENEFITS, AND EARLY INDICATORS

The pilot generated substantial increases in proactive student outreach and provided early evidence that AI-supported workflows could improve both staff efficiency and the timeliness of student interventions.

- **Increased Outreach Capacity:** During a seven-week pilot period, the student success team sent nearly 5,000 personalized outreach emails.
- **Productivity Gains:** Prior to the pilot, the team had sent approximately 400 proactive outreach emails over the course of a year, representing an estimated 32x increase in outreach activity.
- **Timely Student Engagement:** Students reportedly commented on the relevance and timing of outreach messages, suggesting that interventions were occurring at moments when support was needed.
- **Higher-Value Staff Work:** Coaches spent less time gathering information manually and more time exercising judgment, prioritizing outreach, and engaging directly with students.
- **Institutional Visibility:** Pilot results were shared with senior leadership, including the Board of Regents and the institution's Chief AI Officer, creating momentum for broader institutional discussion and potential expansion.

"AI allowed our student success team to move from limited, manual outreach to timely, personalized support at scale. The lesson for us was that this is not about replacing people; it is about helping staff focus their time where human judgment and connection matter most."

— Caleb Simmons, Vice Provost of Arizona Online, University of Arizona

WHAT MADE THE PILOT SUCCESSFUL

Several organizational and operational factors contributed to the success of the initiative. Stakeholders consistently emphasized that the pilot succeeded because it addressed a clear institutional need while maintaining strong human oversight and collaborative implementation practices.

- **Clear Operational Need:** The pilot addressed a specific challenge: providing proactive support to a large online student population with limited staff capacity.
- **Strong IT Partnership:** Collaboration between Arizona Online and university IT enabled integration across multiple institutional systems.
- **Intentional Change Management:** Leadership framed AI as an enhancement to staff work rather than a replacement for human roles.
- **Hands-On Training:** Staff received early access, weekly office hours, and opportunities to test workflows before formal pilot measurement began.
- **Human Oversight:** The initiative maintained a strong emphasis on human judgment, review, and relationship-building throughout the communication process.

RISKS, GUARDRAILS, AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The University of Arizona identified several important considerations related to governance, trust, and responsible AI implementation. Program leaders noted that the primary initial concern was not technical but human: staff anxiety regarding the possibility of AI replacing advising and student success roles.

To address this concern, leaders consistently communicated that AI would function as a support tool rather than a substitute for human engagement. Coaches remained responsible for reviewing, editing, and approving all outreach communications.

Additional considerations included data governance, FERPA compliance, privacy, role-based access, and secure integration across institutional systems. The pilot reinforced the importance of maintaining transparency about how AI supports institutional decision-making and preserving human judgment within student support processes.

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IMPLICATIONS AND LESSONS FOR UPCEA MEMBERS

Arizona Online's experience offers several lessons for institutions exploring AI-enabled advising, coaching, and student success operations.

- **Lead with Demonstration:** Stakeholders responded more positively when they could see the workflow and outcomes before engaging in abstract discussions about AI.
- **Change Management is Essential:** Staff required time, reassurance, training, and support to move from uncertainty to adoption.
- **AI Requires Process Redesign:** The pilot demonstrated that AI implementation is not simply a technology add-on; it changes how staff work is organized and prioritized.
- **Human Oversight Must Remain Central:** The institution maintained a strong human-in-the-loop model to preserve judgment, personalization, and student trust.
- **Transferability is High:** The model may be particularly relevant for institutions with large advising caseloads, online learner populations, and fragmented student data systems.