UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA
Using Labor Market Data to Uncover New Markets and Drive Sustainable Growth

Traditional on-campus programs serve a vital role for millions of students across the nation, but an increasing number of institutions are also turning to online programs to drive enrollment growth and reach new markets. This shift can open up incredible opportunity for colleges, but also presents unique challenges.

What programs would best align with labor market needs? How much enrollment can you anticipate? Where should you market the program?

These are the questions Aaron King is helping to tackle as program development manager at the University of Florida’s Distance Learning office. King uses labor market data from Analyst to forecast program demand and identify what he calls “education deserts.” This insight helps UF develop and market relevant online programs that expand the university’s impact beyond Gainesville.

To read the full case study, visit economicmodeling.com/uf-online-growth
While expanding online programs offers a great way to boost enrollment for universities, informed decision-making is crucial for strategic, sustainable growth. That’s why the University of Florida Office of Distance Learning (ODL) is using Analyst, Emsi’s comprehensive labor market analytics tool.

UF uses Analyst to locate “education deserts”—regions with high demand for grads from a particular program, but no institutions currently supplying that need. UF can then target marketing campaigns in those regions and engage local employers in partnerships.

By using labor market data to assess market viability and refine curriculum, UF is developing in-demand programs that expand the university’s impact far beyond Gainesville.

THE PROMISE AND PITFALLS OF ONLINE GROWTH

TRADITIONAL ON-CAMPUS PROGRAMS serve a vital role for millions of students across the nation. But as student demographics continue to shift and technology continues to improve, an increasing number of colleges are creating an online platform to drive enrollment growth and expand their impact.

While online programs provide unprecedented freedom and opportunity for growth, they come with their own risks and challenges as well. How can you find the right students to market to? Or know you’ve found a program that taps into a real workforce need? How can you avoid scaling up a new online program one year, only to see enrollment drop in the next? In other words: how can you grow responsibly?

These are the kinds of questions Aaron King wrestles with in his role as program development manager at the University of Florida’s Distance Learning office. King’s mission is to help busy program coordinators by taking some of the guesswork out of their planning process. But when he first got into his current

Aaron King
role, he found that collecting the necessary data was a painstaking task, often requiring visits to multiple data sources, like BLS and IPEDS, and manual searching of job postings to get a sense for employer demand. “We were searching for data in all of these different, specific areas,” King remembered. “There were all these times when I said, ‘Man, I just wish there was a way that I could seamlessly connect these different pieces.’”

That was what drew King to Emsi’s Analyst. Analyst gives King the data he needs, including labor market trends, program completions, job postings, and more, all in one user-friendly interface. With this steady source of relevant, up-to-date information, he and his colleagues are able to make informed decisions about when and where to grow UF’s online graduate programs.

UNCOVERING TARGET MARKETS

One of their most exciting successes so far has resulted in new partnerships and focused marketing efforts for UF’s online graduate program in urban and regional planning. Looking to increase enrollment for the program, King and his team began to hunt for “education deserts”: fast-growing cities with a need for urban planners, but a lack of programs providing qualified graduates to fill those roles.

Using Analyst, they plotted out the 100 fastest-growing metro areas, and then focused in on the cities with the highest occupation growth, number of hires, and number of job postings related to city planning. They then cross-referenced this list with cities where no graduate program in urban and regional planning was available within a 50 mile radius (approximately a one-hour commute, one way).

This produced a short list of strategic MSAs where King’s team could focus their marketing and digital advertising efforts. Why burn through advertising budgets when you already know the areas most in need of your program? According to King, taking this data-driven approach has real benefits. “There’s less testing that has to be done, less fishing out there for markets if we can identify them ahead of time,” said King. “It’s a cost saver. And it’s a fundamentally more informed way of going about that work.”

DATA-ENABLED EMPLOYER ENGAGEMENT

In addition to uncovering new markets for existing programs, UF is using labor market data to better engage industry partners for curriculum development. Like many institutions, UF works closely with their industry advisory boards to ensure that new programs are aligned with labor market needs. King’s team adds value to these partnerships by using Analyst to get a sense for employers’ current workforce and future talent needs.

For example, using the company talent profile report, King can quickly pinpoint the roles and specific skills that an employer is listing in job postings, and see how those trends have changed over the past year. This data enables UF to approach industry partners with key information already in-hand, and even provide additional insight to inform the conversation. “It’s interesting—sometimes they wouldn’t have noticed that they were hiring more of these people, or...
fewer of those people,” said King. “Coming to them with that data allowed us to establish some credibility right away. We were able to develop a common understanding of what the challenges were, and that’s helped us build a really cool collaboration.”

This data-driven cooperation has proven especially valuable for UF’s computer and information engineering programs, which face the unique challenge of keeping up with the tech industry’s rapid pace of change. To address this challenge, UF’s Office of Distance Learning is pivoting towards certificate programs that are shorter and more responsive to industry needs than a four-year degree, but that offer more in-depth, comprehensive instruction than an un-accredited bootcamp could provide. Using the company talent profile to guide conversations with industry partners, UF has been able to ensure that these new online certificates address the needs of employers and provide immediate value to students looking to up-skill.

RIGHT PROGRAMS, RIGHT SIZE

King recalls how before Analyst, assessing the long-term viability of new programs wasn’t always smooth sailing. In particular, he’s learned from experience to beware of labor market “bubbles.” Faculty might get a sense of pent up demand for a program and, understandably, want to respond to the need. But without data, it can be difficult to gauge the magnitude of that demand, let alone how it’s projected to change in the future.

This can result in programs that start off at an unsustainable scale or grow too big too fast. Enrollment would spike in the first few years, and the university would scale up the program—right before enrollment dropped unexpectedly. Now, King and his team can use Analyst to identify bubbles by drilling into more detailed regional data, all the way down to the company level.

“Maybe we find out that the labor market demand is coming from a big company that just hired a bunch of people, but that won’t keep hiring for long,” King explained. “Drilling into specific data allows us to think about the long-term viability for new programs. In other words, not planning for the 30 students you get in the first year, but for the 15 students you have each year after that.”

UF uses this data to review current programs, as well. After finding the major employers of a specific region

Job Postings Table, Analyst

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Job Title</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Company</th>
<th>Skills</th>
<th>Unique Postings from Sep 2016 - Apr 2019</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>11-3021</td>
<td>Computer and Information Systems Managers</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13-1081</td>
<td>Logisticsian</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15-1113</td>
<td>Computer and Information Research Scientists</td>
<td>222</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15-1123</td>
<td>Computer Systems Analysts</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15-1122</td>
<td>Information Security Analysts</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15-1131</td>
<td>Computer Programmers</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15-1132</td>
<td>Software Developers, Applications</td>
<td>67</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15-1133</td>
<td>Software Developers, Systems Software</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15-1134</td>
<td>Web Developers</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15-1142</td>
<td>Network and Computer Systems Administrators</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15-11331</td>
<td>Computer User Support Specialists</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15-1199</td>
<td>Computer Occupations, All Other</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17-2061</td>
<td>Computer Hardware Engineers</td>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17-2081</td>
<td>Environmental Engineers</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

PC: University of Florida/Brianne Lehan
and identifying the skills they’re seeking, King and his colleagues will use that information to evaluate their own programs’ curriculum, asking: “How does this program connect to the workforce needed in this area? What are we missing?” With this vigilant attention to skills gaps informing their programs, the university can confidently equip their students for a workforce that will welcome them.

LESS TIME, MORE IMPACT

What’s the biggest difference Analyst has made to King’s job? Time. Now that he doesn’t have to spend all of his time chasing down the data, more of his day can be spent analyzing it for new opportunities.

“Processes that used to take us two weeks or three weeks are now taking us a few days,” King said. “I can spend less time doing the data gathering, and more time doing analysis—thinking about what the data means for whatever program we’re talking about. It’s allowed us to take the step from having information, to creating insight.”

Currently, he and his colleagues are looking to use the urban and regional Planning program as a model for other online programs as well. King is doing what he came to do: help busy program coordinators by taking the guesswork out of their process.

“As somebody who works at a university but isn’t in the classroom, I still feel like I’m making an impact,” King said. “I didn’t really feel that way as much before we got Analyst. It’s exciting to me that I can support the faculty in creating a program from scratch that, in a couple of years, can change lives. Maybe grads get new job opportunities out of it. Or maybe they get a promotion. Or maybe they start a business. I get to be a part of the story of somebody’s life in that way. And that’s really exciting.”

If you have questions about Analyst or Emsi’s other solutions for higher education, please contact us at economic-modeling.com/contact. We’d love to learn more about the work you’re doing and explore how our data can help!