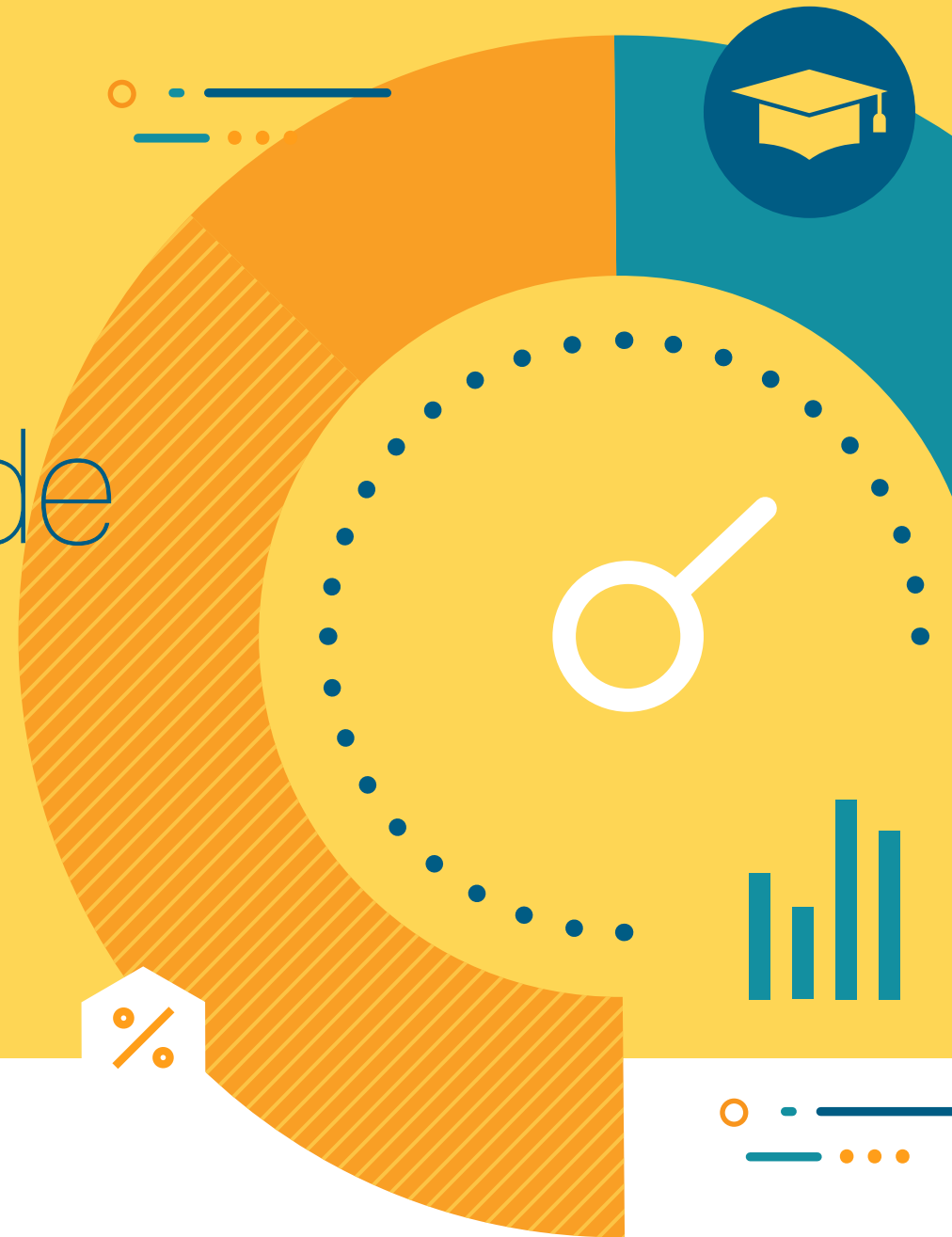# Scaling and Accelerating Institution-Wide Analytics:

Why George Mason University chose HelioCampus to support growth and maintain student success

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GEORGE MASON UNIVERSITY

George Mason University (Mason) has been growing steadily and does not plan on stopping anytime soon, with a 10-year goal to produce

100,000 graduates by 2024.

To help them understand how to effectively scale their enrollment yield, graduation rates, facilities, and the other factors necessary to meet this goal, they knew they needed to move beyond their existing, siloed data. They needed a partner, and they found one in HelioCampus.

Though only 45 years old, George Mason University is already the largest public research university in the Commonwealth of Virginia. Originally a satellite campus of the University of Virginia, the institution has moved way beyond that status over the last decade. They've recently earned Research I status and have expanded to offer 82 undergraduate programs, 88 masters degrees, and 39 doctoral/law programs.

Today, the Fairfax-based institution serves 37,000 students, including those at campuses in Arlington and Manassas, Virginia, and even Songdo, South Korea. "We have grown by a thousand students every year I have been here," says David Burge, Mason's Vice President of Enrollment Management since 2015. "This is great news on one hand, but it also comes with a host of challenges that have to be met with available resources."

Growth is positive, but also precarious. "It *is* possible to grow too fast," Burge says. "As the enrollment manager, I live in fear of failing to meet our intake enrollment goals, but also of exceeding our intake enrollment goals."

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Balancing Growth With Diversity and Student Success

Mason's study body is diverse. Nearly a third of their students are first generation, half are from underrepresented racial or ethnic backgrounds, and one in eight are adult students. Add Mason's international presence to this equation and the result is a very complex set of needs for learners, educators, and administrators alike. "You have to create a data environment that accounts for that complexity," says Burge.

Despite the complicated demographics of the student body, Mason's performance numbers have been robust, and they have no desire to hurt these outcomes in the name of growth. "We have little variation in student success by ethnicity. In fact, our retention and graduation rates are essentially the same across demographics" says Burge. "And those rates are good—higher than national averages."

Burge and his colleagues knew that in order to grow while continuing to meet diverse learners' needs and support student success, they would need to reengineer their existing data infrastructure.

> We had a growing appetite, not just to be able to unlock data and see what is or was, but to predict *what will be*," he says. "We had done some good work in the past few years with building data marts. But their function was not analytical so much as it was operational. Our next stage was to reinvent those data marts for the future—and we needed outside expertise to make that happen."
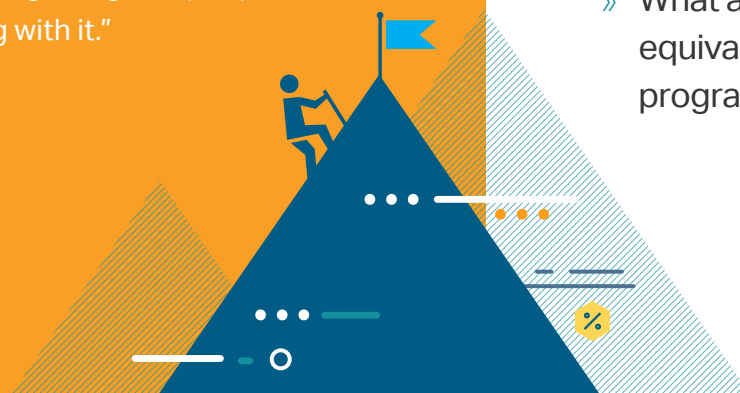
Institutional Challenges to Using Data Effectively

Burge knew that the institutional compartmentalization of data was one of the first challenges facing the new project. "Our data owners take a lot of responsibility for protecting data," he says. "On its face, this is a good thing, but we were inadvertently hiding our data from ourselves. We see our project with HelioCampus as a way to break through these silos, come together, and move from the mentality of 'my data,' 'her data,' or 'his data,' to 'the university's data.'"

Actionizing data for decision-making was another obstacle. "According to a recent internal survey, the primary way we've been using retention data is just to update leadership *about* the retention data," says Burge. "Our sector has a long way to go when it comes to leveraging real-time data and getting it to people who can actually do something with it."

For the university, leveraging the data effectively means understanding the connections among enrollment, student success, and financial data, and developing insights to questions like:

» Who is likely to enroll in what program?

» What financial aid will be vacated by students who are not returning?

» What strategies (marketing or financial aid) would increase yield?

» What revenue is generated by each student enrolled by course, degree, program, school, and college?

» What are the total instructional costs per full-time equivalent (FTE) student by level, course, degree, program, dept, school, and college?

HelioCampus: an Accelerant to Growth

The search for a true partner began with an exhaustive RFP process. "Most vendors will just deliver what you ask for and you will be forever beholden," says Burge. "But we were really looking for someone from whom we could learn." With a customizable platform complemented by a deep background in data science, it became clear that HelioCampus was the partner they were looking for.

"Part of the beauty of the HelioCampus model for us has been their expertise in data science," says Burge. "It is a huge accelerant. I have no doubt that we could eventually build and maintain some kind of similar data environment, but you would have to give us so much time and we would have to forego so many other priorities."

"Thanks to the evolving nature of our partnership, they've even provided us with additional data models," he says. "HelioCampus shares their knowledge. As they learn things with us and with other clients, they are able to expand our thinking. We would never be at this stage if left to ourselves."

As Mason completes the rollout of their new data infrastructure, they are excited about the days ahead. **"People are intrigued, talking about the program and asking to be in on the ground floor," says Burge. "It is exciting to have people clamoring for more data."** Luckily, with HelioCampus as a partner, the faculty and staff of George Mason University will have all the data they need to support their diverse and growing student body.

Connect your data dots.
If you would like more information on HelioCampus solutions, **email info@heliocampus.com.**

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