## Case Study
**Missouri Southern State University**
*Location:* Joplin, MO
*2016 Budget:* $80 million
*Employees:* 600

# Highlights

## Rapid Financial Results; Lasting Cultural Change

Higher education is in financial crisis – not just in the U.S., but around the world. One of the institutions that is leading the way in finding solutions to these challenges is MSSU – the first public university to adopt what is being called the Great Game of Education (GGOE). "We think of it now as the only sensible way to run a university," says Scott Cragin, a professor of marketing and management who is one of the leaders of implementing GGOE at the university.

Cragin and the university's president, Dr. Alan Marble, first heard about the Great Game of Business in 1988 when they attended a lecture by Jack Stack. But it was three years ago, when the university faced a deficit of $2.3 million, that the idea of using the game as a way to help the university change its financial fortunes was brought back up in a Financial Stability Committee meeting.

The challenge was that the university is funded by two primary sources: tuition and fees, and state appropriations. But with the state continuing to cut funding to the institution, and a law on the books that prevents the school from raising tuition rates more than the rate of inflation, MSSU staff and faculty needed to find creative ways to close their budget gaps. The impetus has grown even larger with the likelihood of continuing cuts from the state.

One of the MSSU team's first challenges was simply developing tools university units – or "cost centers" – could use to track performance, which they did by creating web-based scoreboards that any employee of the university can access at any time. In particular, the scoreboards highlight the school's progress toward improving its critical number, which is currently operating cash.

In parallel, the team recognized that they needed to teach every employee what those numbers meant. So they developed a comprehensive training program that covers all aspects of playing the Great Game of Education. To date, the numbers look better – enrollment is at a five-year high and operating cash is growing – but the team continues to work together to identify the key drivers that will create sustainable success.

"The GGOE drives a cultural change, from a top-down, information-as-power mindset to one of transparency, empowerment and open communication," says Cragin. "It demands accountability and fosters ownership."



## Organizational Background

Founded in 1937, Missouri Southern State University (MSSU) has evolved from an outstanding junior college, to its role today as a comprehensive four-year, state-supported institution. The university currently serves more than 6,000 students in over 140 academic programs.

"A university is by nature a highly decentralized creature that makes communication and a huddle system challenging. The university's Culture Committee has embraced this challenge, and a task force is working to roll out a grassroots huddle system. It is being piloted in our Student Affairs division at this time. At a recent Culture Committee meeting, I heard exciting reports from staff members about the things they are learning about other sub-units. I could hear the operational silos melting as they shared their early experience."

~ Jeff Gibson, Director of Budget and Operations

## Playing the Game Together

As a way to encourage employees to take introductory and financial literacy training, MSSU ran a MiniGame in which employees would win university-themed merchandise based on the number of people who participated.  The team won that MiniGame, with more than 80% of the campus community completing those training modules. As a result, everyone on campus got a "Get in the Game" T-shirt.

Even students have gotten into the act. During the 2016-17 academic year, the Student Activities and Recreation Department convened a weekly student life huddle, where it was common for student representatives to call out numbers from their areas. For example, the student worker overseeing, say, the intramural sports or the Campus Activities Board would provide the update for that week's participation. Student retention is critical for MSSU and such student "touchpoints" have been shown to increase retention.

> "I am proud of the interdepartmental collaboration that has taken place. There has been a great deal of teamwork involved in order to develop the implementation of the Great Game. We have piloted our huddle rhythm once in Student Affairs. Even after one meeting, it was awesome to see the interest that leaders were taking in the metrics of other departments."
>
> ~ Landon Adams, Director of Student Life and Conduct

## What's Next?

The next big step for the MSSU team is to establish a more regular huddle rhythm on a unit, departmental and university-wide basis, using lessons learned from the pilot program in Student Affairs. The team also is looking for ways to share a stake in the outcome with employees when they find ways to exceed their goals, and to begin teaching other higher-education institutions how they, too, can implement GGOE.