

Connecting Program Economics to Student Success at Rutgers University–Newark

Using the NACUBO Program Scanner to Build Shared Data Definitions, Strengthen Collaboration, and Inform Program-Level Decisions

Rutgers University–Newark (RU-N) is one of the regional campuses of Rutgers University, a public land-grant research institution in New Jersey. Roughly 65 percent of RU-N's revenue comes from tuition, and state support is shrinking; as a result, decisions about enrollment, retention, and program sustainability carry significant financial weight. Although RU-N has long prioritized student success, relevant data and decisions have historically been distributed across enrollment management, institutional effectiveness, student affairs, finance, and the academic schools. Building on earlier work with the NACUBO Student Success Hub, RU-N partnered with Rutgers Business School (RBS) and Trivium BI, a NACUBO subject-matter expert, to apply the Program Scanner and examine programs at a more granular level.

Bringing the Story Together

The Program Scanner, together with the Student Success Hub framework, prompted RU-N to rethink how data are collected, defined, interpreted, and used.

This work built on earlier enrollment-planning efforts, expanding the focus beyond how many students enroll to understanding the programs, resources, and supports needed to help them persist and succeed. The team focused on three practices:

- **Put Finance at the Table Early:** Finance had typically been engaged after schools and other units had already developed plans or made decisions. Finance now serves as a thought partner, helping convene institutional effectiveness, enrollment, student affairs, and the academic schools at the beginning of the process.

This earlier collaboration helps stakeholders understand the financial, academic, and student-success implications of different choices before decisions are finalized.

- **Agree on Definitions Before Debating Numbers:** Rather than beginning with disagreements about whose data are correct, the team first established common definitions and shared assumptions for terms such as first-year student, transfer student, first-generation student, and full-time equivalent.

This process creates a common foundation for analysis and makes it easier to identify meaningful differences in student progress and outcomes.

- **Involve Stakeholders Throughout:** Rather than presenting a completed analysis, RU-N invited teams to help shape the questions and understand the methodology, building trust in the results.

Improvement Project

Analyzing Program-Level Cost of Instruction to Inform Strategic Budget Decisions

Toolkit Used

Program Scanner

Results

- Finance, institutional effectiveness, enrollment, student affairs, and the schools now participate in a shared decision-making process from the beginning of the analysis.
- RU-N is developing a shared and trusted data environment, supported by clearly documented definitions, assumptions, and methodologies.
- Rutgers Business School is serving as a pilot for defining and analyzing program-level cost of instruction, with an approach designed for potential expansion across RU-N and, where appropriate, the broader Rutgers system.
- The work is creating a stronger foundation for connecting resource decisions to retention, graduation, career readiness, and equitable student outcomes.



“Finance was usually brought in at the end. Through the work we're doing with NACUBO, we're now sitting at the table helping guide conversations and decisions in which we previously weren't involved.”

Robbie Campbell-Lissade,

*Senior Director of Strategic Planning and Finance,
Rutgers University–Newark*

“By leading with the student and grounding decisions in shared, transparent data, RU-N is positioned to align its resources with student outcomes and long-term financial sustainability.”

Dr. Melissa Rivera,

*Senior Associate Dean of Finance and Administration,
Rutgers Business School–Newark and New Brunswick*

Using the Program Scanner to See Programs More Clearly

RU-N and RBS used the Program Scanner to analyze program economics at a granular level and connect those findings to academic planning and budget processes. The work began with the business school, focusing on developing a shared understanding of program-level cost of instruction that could be applied across the campus.

As Dr. Melissa Rivera, Senior Associate Dean of Finance and Administration at RBS, noted, the challenge was not a lack of data. Data were housed in separate systems, offices defined metrics differently, and reports were often designed for specific operational purposes rather than institution-wide decision-making.

The team also addressed technical challenges, including system integration and obtaining the permissions required to access relevant data sources. An early insight emerged when cross-functional conversations revealed that different offices had been working on related questions independently.

The team has been transparent about what the data represent, how they are collected, where limitations exist, and where gaps remain. That transparency enables leaders to have more constructive conversations about what the numbers mean and how they should inform action.

From Transactional to Strategic Conversations

Previous discussions often centered on reporting enrollment figures and budget variances after decisions were made. RU-N is now asking broader questions:

- Which enrollment mix best supports student success, academic quality, and long-term financial sustainability?
- How do financial aid and scholarships affect persistence and completion?
- Which advising, academic support, and student-engagement investments help students remain on track?
- Where do differences in retention, graduation, and career outcomes exist across student populations?
- How can resources be directed toward programs and services that expand access, social mobility, and opportunity?

Finance now serves as a strategic partner, helping stakeholders understand the implications of different choices and identify how resources can support student progress from enrollment through graduation and into the workforce.

Sustaining Momentum for Future Success

RU-N's experience offers lessons for institutions beginning this work:

- **Treat the Work as Iterative:** Collecting, defining, interpreting, and improving data is continuous. Definitions, systems, and questions will evolve as institutional priorities and student needs change.
- **Prioritize Relationships:** Take time to understand how different offices define and use data. Collaboration builds trust, improves interpretation, and creates shared accountability.
- **Begin with the Institutional Question:** Start with the outcomes that matter most—such as persistence, timely graduation, equity, career readiness, and community impact—rather than collecting data simply because it is available.
- **Start Small:** Institutions do not need perfect data to begin. Start with focused questions, such as why students stop out, which populations need additional support, or which program investments are associated with stronger student outcomes.
- **Keep Students at the Center:** Student success should guide the questions we ask, the data we analyze, and the resource decisions that follow. It is an institutional responsibility, not the responsibility of a single office or division.