

CASE STUDY

HELIOCAMPUS BENCHMARKING
AND AUBURN UNIVERSITY:

Data-Driven Growth in the "COVID Recession"



HelioCAMPUS

Auburn University (AU), founded in 1856, is a public research university in Auburn, Alabama with nearly 25,000 undergraduate students. It is the second-largest public university in Alabama, one of the state's two flagship universities, and has recently earned an R1 research designation. AU's long history is a testament to its capacity to adapt. Now the school, which was ranked the 17th most efficient university¹ in the nation, is developing a plan to move through what CFO Kelli Shomaker calls the "COVID recession."

"Efficiency has to tie us back to our mission," Shomaker explained in a recent webinar on ROI and the COVID-19 crisis. In order to identify efficiencies and ways to bolster student success, AU partnered with HelioCampus.

As universities across the country struggle to stay afloat through the COVID recession, AU is focusing on adding programs where they will be most impactful and making data-driven decisions to avoid understaffing in target areas. With data backing their decision-making processes, AU is paving an ambitious path through what will likely be one of the biggest challenges in the history of American higher education.



¹ <https://www.usnews.com/education/blogs/college-rankings-blog/articles/2017-11-27/learn-which-top-ranked-colleges-operate-most-efficiently>

Making Smarter Administrative Investments



While many institutions are making impulse cuts to survive the COVID recession, AU is looking to position itself for long-term success. To do this, they are using benchmarks from HelioCampus to better understand how they compare with similar institutions so they can make smarter financial decisions during this time of economic uncertainty.

AU's relationship with HelioCampus began in 2016, when the university implemented a Responsible Centered Management (RCM) budget model and needed intuitive data to support their goals. With the data HelioCampus provides – including more than 50 data points that focus in areas like departmental support, IT, human resources, and more – AU could finally make informed decisions around administrative spending, the fastest growing expense category for colleges across the country.

The Power of Benchmarks



In the wake of the COVID recession, HelioCampus's data allowed AU to be proactive. With the platform, the university can compare their current spending to comparable institutions to get a sense of where they are over- and under-invested according to industry benchmarks. This is a huge asset during periods of financial uncertainty, because it allows the university to quickly identify which areas need the most support.

For example, AU made the decision to continue hiring in IT despite implementing controlled hiring due to COVID-19. This was due in large part to data from HelioCampus, which identified IT as a target area for investment. These data points prompted AU to launch an institutional review of IT compensation, which revealed that their staffing challenges were due in large part to competitive salaries in nearby Atlanta, and the private sector that draws IT professionals away from higher ed. Armed with this knowledge, the university could focus their attention on gaining traction in the IT department to ensure growth.

Training (and Retaining) New Leaders



Layoffs and furloughs are on the table at nearly every university in America in 2020, but AU is taking a different approach. “We want to recruit, we want to reward, and we want to retain our faculty and our staff,” says Shomaker.

In higher education, human capital is a huge expense. If you hire inefficiently or have high turnover rates, you are not maximizing administrative spending. HelioCampus provides labor data across administrative departments, allowing AU to make educated decisions around retention, growth, and hiring. This data helps identify under-funded departments where employees may be unsatisfied due to stress or resource strain, as well as over-funded departments where money can be reallocated to support institutional growth.

Inspired by data from HelioCampus, AU developed new programs to support employee retention. The New Supervisory Leadership Program, for example, which allows staff to grow within the university system, began with a small cohort and now has a long waiting list. To accompany this program, AU created an onboarding center for new staff to support initial training and ensure all employees have the support they need to do their jobs well.

Ultimately, an efficient administration supports student success. When you invest in training and retaining staff, you benefit students – whether it’s through development dollars, extracurricular opportunities, or career support.

Growth in Economic Uncertainty

As many universities shrink in response to COVID-19, AU is focusing on long-term growth and financial stability. Their confidence comes in large part from their work with HelioCampus Benchmarking, which provides data to support the university's mission to become more efficient in the face of economic uncertainty. Focusing on growth and supporting students and staff in need will not only help AU through the COVID recession – it promises financial and educational gains long after the coronavirus is gone.



If you would like more information on HelioCampus solutions, email info@heliocampus.com.

