

A HOLISTIC APPROACH TO GROWTH

HOW A **UNIFIED PARTNERSHIP**
ENABLED A UNIVERSITY TO THRIVE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2016, the University of West Alabama (UWA) understood the tremendous growth potential of online learning, but were struggling to overcome declining student enrollments in that modality. The university aimed to reverse this trend by diversifying their online degrees, implementing targeted marketing tactics, and expanding their enrollment team; however, they lacked the expertise and capital to launch these initiatives on their own.

By partnering with Learning House, a Wiley brand, UWA gained a dedicated partner who rapidly enhanced the university's enrollment for best practices, contributed significant funds to expand marketing efforts, and provided immediate staffing capacity to start and retain online students. Learning House was selected over other online program management providers based on their expertise in supporting online students from inquiry through graduation, their cultural commitment to improving students' lives, and robust resources for enrolling and retaining online students. Learning House also offered an enterprise approach to growth that encompassed attracting students to UWA's full suite of online programs. Employing these strategic advantages, Learning House:

- ▶ **Successfully provided advising support for more than 1,500 online students within weeks of starting the partnership**
- ▶ **Established a field team that greatly expanded UWA's partnership network and contributed to 34 percent of online student starts since Jan. 2017**
- ▶ **Fully staffed an enrollment team who executed high-touch strategies to double annual online student starts from fewer than 1,000 to about 2,000 in the first year of the partnership**
- ▶ **Led marketing initiatives that improved brand awareness and increased leads 137 percent year-over-year from 2017 to 2018**
- ▶ **Launched and managed 72 online programs, including 16 new programs within two years of forming the partnership**
- ▶ **Added geotargeting to digital campaigns and extended field recruiting to attract more out-of-state students, who now account for 21 percent of UWA's online population**

With Learning House, UWA has forged a collaborative relationship dedicated to the university's long-term success. Additional enrollment, retention, and marketing resources provided by Learning House increased UWA's online population to 2,960 actively enrolled students. Such success has spurred UWA to explore additional solutions that Learning House offers, including piloting instructional design services to meet the evolving needs of students.

ABOUT THE UNIVERSITY OF WEST ALABAMA

The University of West Alabama is located in the heart of Livingston on the western border of the state. Originally chartered as a church-related female academy in 1835, the school developed into a leading regional university. UWA now offers more than 70 online programs with about 3,000 online students and serves a diverse student body.



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– *Dr. Jan Miller, UWA*

CHALLENGES

In 2016, the University of West Alabama had built considerable local awareness for their online graduate teaching programs, but they aspired to serve a larger, more diverse student population by expanding their slate of undergraduate programs. Business, psychology, and counseling programs seemed to offer viable growth potential online, but the university was struggling to gain traction.

“We were known primarily as a school that educated educators,” said Dr. Jan Miller, dean of the college of education at UWA. “We wanted to diversify our programmatic footprint while accelerating growth of our education programs, but we needed help in that arena.”

UWA's struggles stemmed from limited expertise in digital learning and a lack of internal capacity, said John M. Anderson, senior vice president of partnership management at Learning House. "While UWA had mature online teaching programs, they had maxed out their internal potential for entering new markets," he said. "They needed an external partner to form best practices for a wider range of programs and fortify their enrollment team to ignite their next level of growth."

Growth depended on partnering with an online program management (OPM)

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company that had financial resources and personnel to expand UWA's enrollment team and invest in new marketing initiatives. For example, the university sought the support of an OPM company that could extend their brand beyond their local community and attract distance learners who lived in cities throughout Alabama and surrounding states.

UWA also sought best practices for engaging online learners, whose expectations and needs are different than traditional students.

"Online enrollment moves at a fast pace and we had questions around how to proactively contact potential students without seeming too aggressive," Dr. Miller said. The university faced similar challenges for how to provide a positive experience to their current online students. "Our advising team was limited in size and expertise for best serving our online students, so their experience fell short of the quality we wanted to deliver," she said.

At the same time, UWA viewed online programs as critical to future success. Online learning had been a lone growth area for most institutions in recent years, so UWA saw the importance of expanding the geographic reach of recruiting efforts and diversifying their portfolio of programs. To succeed, they needed the support of a partner capable of sparking growth in the online space.

SOLUTIONS

UWA formally explored partnering with Learning House in January 2016. The university considered several other OPM companies, and selected Learning House for their student-centered culture, comprehensive expertise, and commitment to driving growth in a variety of online programs.

“Learning House committed to making a total investment in our programs and pledged to promote the success of our students,” Dr. Miller said. “Learning House’s student-first mindset was key to assuring us that our students would be in good hands.”

UWA appreciated that Learning House didn’t plan to cherry-pick a few online programs that offered an easy path to enrollment growth. Instead, Learning House proposed an enterprise approach to enroll more students in existing online programs and spark additional growth by launching new areas of study.

“We weren’t just focused on a few of their hero programs,” Anderson said. “We planned to grow the entire institution.”

UWA and Learning House quickly established a relationship based on mutual trust and confidence, which allowed Learning House to implement enrollment and retention services in good faith — before they signed a partnership agreement. UWA’s fall 2016 semester was slated to pass before they could finalize a formal contract of services. To make an immediate impact on UWA’s outcomes, Learning House dedicated a team of enrollment counselors to work with prospective students on the university’s behalf. Student engagement ran smoothly as Learning House leveraged their extensive online learning expertise and infrastructure to support UWA’s existing and prospective students.

“Early on, Learning House’s adaptability was critical,” Dr. Miller said. “They quickly learned our students’ needs and got to work leading our online retention and enrollment efforts.”



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Within two weeks, Learning House was working to enroll about 2,000 prospective online students. Learning House was also managing the retention process for more than 1,500 online students at UWA.

Anderson said this led to quick success. “Thanks to hard work and close collaboration with UWA leadership, we doubled annual online student starts during the partnership’s first year,” he said. “That growth was possible because of their leadership’s bold vision and willingness to swiftly adopt best practices.”

Brand Building and Lead Generation

After the partnership formally began in Oct. 2016, UWA and Learning House dove into developing new marketing initiatives. The partners were starting nearly from scratch, as UWA previously dedicated modest marketing funds for online learning.

“Everything changed for the better after we teamed up with Learning House,” Dr. Miller said. “They directly funded marketing initiatives to make a splash building the university’s brand as an online program provider.”

Learning House developed strategic plans to substantially increase awareness for UWA and their online programs. The company has fully funded and implemented a diverse set of tactics, including:

- ▶ **An overhaul of the UWA website that focuses on online degrees, with enhancements to improve aesthetics and user experience, increase organic visitors, and boost program inquiries**
- ▶ **An engaging social media strategy with Learning House managing Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram pages for UWA’s online programs**
- ▶ **Social influencers who share their UWA student experience in blog posts and social posts to provide an unfiltered view of the benefits of UWA’s online programs**
- ▶ **Multi-channel campaigns leveraging digital and traditional mediums, including search marketing, display ads, inbound content, email, billboards, radio, streaming video and TV; for the latter, Learning House created three 30-second spots to build brand and programmatic awareness in the Birmingham media market and additional cities via digital content providers**

In addition, Learning House has generated interest and applications by deploying a team of field representatives to enhance UWA's on-ground recruiting initiatives. Based in Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, and Florida, the field team meets face-to-face with potential students at career fairs, teaching conferences, and other events that align with UWA's programs.

Field representatives are full-time Learning House employees — staffing that doesn't increase university payroll costs. Learning House has also allocated significant funds to marketing campaigns on UWA's behalf, which achieved a 137 percent year-over-year boost in leads in 2018. But this is much more than a story about leads — this is an enrollment story.

High-Touch Enrollment and Retention Strategies

Learning House has accelerated online student starts at UWA by dedicating an expert team of enrollment counselors who provide personal guidance to prospective online students. Personal contact is key to the team's success, said Julie Delich, senior director of enrollment and retention at Learning House.

"Many universities simply send automated enrollment emails to leads, but students need much more support than that," Delich said. "At Learning House, we take a proactive, personalized approach to connect with every prospective student. And because UWA is aligned with our best practices, they allow us to use a dynamic contact strategy that ensures we connect with students."

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This high-touch approach allows Learning House enrollment counselors to directly collaborate with prospective students and find the programs that align with

their goals. And Learning House's high-touch approach continues after students enroll at UWA. The company's dedicated online advisors assist UWA students throughout their degree program and provide resources to promote their success. This includes monitoring student behavior and performance to offer support to students who fall behind.

Learning House’s high-touch enrollment and retention initiatives increased UWA’s actively enrolled online students from 1,990 students in fall 2016 to 2,960 in fall 2018. This considerable gain in online students reversed a 3 percent annual decline that occurred the year before the partnership began.

Expanding and Diversifying UWA's Online Programs

UWA and Learning House have bolstered their marketing and enrollment efforts by committing to the delivery of market-driven online programs. Dr. Miller said that work to expand UWA’s programmatic offerings began early in the partnership. “Learning House had just rolled out infrastructure to manage 56 of our online programs when we prepared to greatly expand our catalog,” she said. “It took a lot of work, but Learning House was flexible in dedicating resources to get these programs to market quickly.”

Learning House has launched 16 new online programs since they began providing OPM services to UWA in Oct. 2016. Additions

include a diverse set of education, business, and psychology/counseling programs that allow UWA to build brand awareness in new markets and generate more leads.

“WE’VE **EXPONENTIALLY EXPANDED AND DIVERSIFIED** THEIR STUDENT POPULATION ACROSS A BROADER SET OF PROGRAMS”
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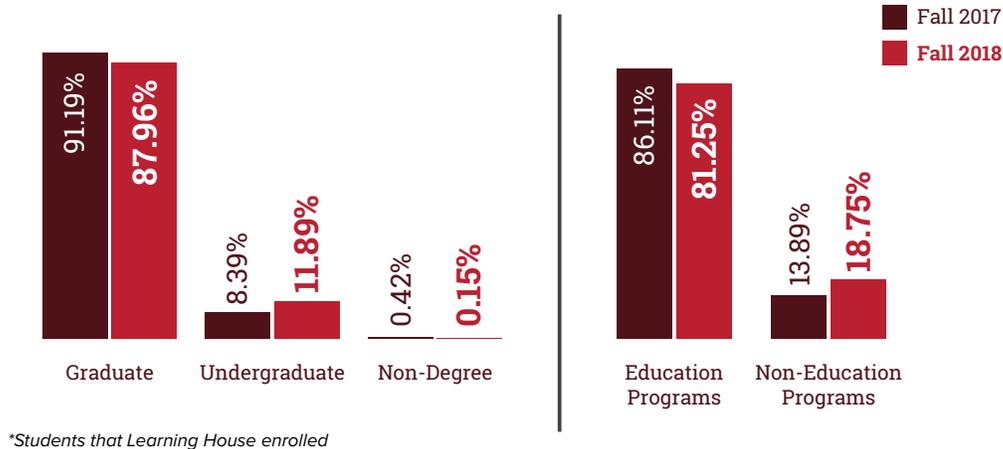
“We’ve exponentially expanded and diversified their student population across a broader set of programs,” Anderson said. For example, the portion of online students pursuing a non-education degree at UWA increased from 13.89 percent in fall 2017 to 18.75 percent in fall 2018. Learning House also helped increase the share of online students in undergraduate programs. In fall 2018, 11.89 percent of online students at UWA were seeking a bachelor’s degree, up from 8.39 percent in fall 2017.

Diversification of UWA's Online Student Population



*Students that Learning House enrolled

Diversification of UWA's Online Student Population



Growing Enrollments Through Regional Partnerships

When UWA joined forces with Learning House, they had partnerships with school districts in Alabama and Mississippi for recruiting teachers into graduate education programs, but they lacked the personnel to maximize these opportunities. Learning House's field team has enhanced these relationships by dedicating multiple representatives to the successful recruitment of teachers for UWA's education programs. The field team has leveraged Teacher Connect — a UWA program that offers scholarships to educators — to enroll teachers during district seminars, training sessions, and visits to local schools. Teacher Connect is also a valuable tool that the field team uses to form new partnerships with school districts in Alabama and surrounding states.

The field team has formed recruiting alliances with organizations beyond school districts. A point of emphasis has been the formation of community college partnerships, as the field team has connected UWA with regional community colleges whose students can continue their education at the university. To support these partnerships, Learning House and UWA have collaborated to establish transfer-friendly policies for community college students and develop new scholarships worth up to \$1,500.

“This market is so healthy we’ve dedicated multiple reps to building relationships with community colleges,” said Doug Simmons, senior director of field operations at Learning House.

Learning House has also achieved success for UWA through strategic alliances with regional and national businesses, Simmons said. “We work with businesses to help their employees get exclusive scholarships to UWA programs,” he said. “The university has been very supportive in these efforts. A good example is their Business Connect program, which extends scholarships to employees of UWA business partners. That’s an important tool we employ to connect with new businesses and enroll their employees into programs at UWA.”

As of Nov. 2018, Learning House field representatives have helped UWA expand their network to 178 partners, including 35 community colleges in Alabama and a dozen businesses in Alabama and Georgia. Partnerships with school districts through Teacher Connect now total 131, including 47 school districts that Learning House’s field team identified in Alabama, Georgia, and Mississippi. From Jan. 2017 to Aug. 2018, the field team’s recruiting efforts contributed to 34 percent of online student starts at UWA.

Recruiting More Students in More Places

In addition to forming relationships with regional organizations, Learning House field representatives have extended UWA’s geographic reach beyond Alabama. “We’re staffing to recruit students in Georgia, Mississippi, and Florida,” Simmons said. “Our team supports marketing efforts with boots on the ground to generate leads and applications at events that align with UWA programs.”



For example, after Learning House identified growing demand in Atlanta for college-educated police officers, they assigned a field representative to attend regional events and recruit officers for UWA’s online public safety program. “It’s a solid market because UWA gives up to 42 hours of experiential or technical credit, which makes it easier to recruit veteran officers into the program,” Simmons said.

In 2018, out-of-state online student enrollments accounted for 21 percent of all UWA online students, up from 18 percent in 2017. Dr. Miller said the field team's work in surrounding states contributed to gains in student enrollment. "It wasn't until Learning House reps started recruiting in those regions that we saw consistent growth in out-of-state online students," she said. "The results really speak for themselves."

Laying a Foundation for Long-Term Success

Anderson credits the supportive leadership at UWA for the recent increase in online students. "Their leadership works as a team, is open to trying new things, and completely embraces the partnership," he said. "They have met us halfway on the countless little things we needed for our enrollment team to maximize their potential."

This includes adopting best practices to promote online student start growth. One such change occurred when Learning House worked with UWA to allow students to enroll in online programs much closer to a start date — even during the first week of a semester. Delich said these deadlines provides flexibility that many adult learners need to begin a program.

"When an adult decides to pursue a degree, they're ready immediately," Delich said. "By making the deadline more flexible, adult learners often wait less time to begin class. That's key, because any time that waiting is involved, there's the risk that people will decide to quit the program."

Process improvements have cleared the way for Learning House to do what they do best — enroll and retain students. Learning House has excelled by devoting substantial resources to the partnership, including robust enrollment and retention teams and an infusion of funds to market UWA's online programs.

Jason Walls, senior director of marketing account management at Learning House, said UWA's strong brand led to a speedy return on Learning House's marketing investments. "UWA has solid brand recognition with many students we market to," Walls said. "That's one of UWA's strengths — having a bigger brand provided a foundation for quickly generating leads and growing enrollments."

UWA is further strengthening their brand by committing to outcomes-driven programs. One recent addition is an online doctoral degree in rural education. The university launched the program to capitalize on healthy local demand for professionals who understand the demographics of rural K-12 students. Dr. Miller said Learning House’s enrollment team provided support to swiftly build enrollments for the program.

“We collaborated with Learning House on how to best introduce the program and enrollment took off from there,” Dr. Miller said. “Collaboration is the driving force of our relationship. It’s laying the groundwork for growth that we didn’t know was possible before we began working with Learning House.”

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Shared success has led to collaboration beyond the original partnership agreement. In 2018, UWA piloted instructional design services offered by Learning House. “We’ve provided high-level consulting to UWA faculty

in an effort to enhance existing courses and programs,” Anderson said. “These services will ultimately yield a better experience for students and faculty, and produce better outcomes for the university.”

RESULTS

In fall 2018, 2,960 students were actively enrolled in online programs at UWA, up from 1,990 in fall 2016. These figures represent substantial gains in a variety of education, business, and psychology/counseling programs in both the graduate and undergraduate level. Learning House drove growth by directly staffing a talented team of enrollment counselors, whose personalized efforts have produced a consistently strong lead-to-start conversion rate. Learning House has also expanded and diversified UWA's student population across more online programs via targeted marketing initiatives and the greater geographic reach of a field team who generates online student leads and establishes relationships with organizations in Alabama and surrounding states. In 2018, these combined initiatives produced a 105 percent year-over-year increase in undergraduate student starts, helping to diversify an online population that had been heavily dominated by graduate students.

Based on results achieved through the partnership, UWA is piloting additional services from Learning House. "We're exploring how their instructional design team can help us create new market-based programs," Dr. Miller said. "We believe Learning House can support our efforts to identify and design programs with substantial growth potential."

Dr. Miller said Learning House's flexibility and wealth of expertise has exceeded her expectations. As a result, UWA is exceeding their students' expectations.

"With Learning House as our partner, we have the capacity and insights to not only grow, but provide a better experience to our students," she said. "We can't wait to see where the partnership leads us next."

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About Learning House

Learning House, a [Wiley](#) brand, helps people improve their lives through education. As a complement to the technology-enabled education solutions offered by [Wiley Education Services](#), we partner with more than 60 institutions across the US, Europe, and Australia, and support over 600 degree programs. Additional solutions include Enterprise Learning Solutions, The Software Guild, Learning House International and Advancement Courses. Through our broad portfolio, Learning House delivers more students, more graduates, and better outcomes. For more information visit www.learninghouse.com.