FastTrack™

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

POLARIS
RESEARCH ASSOCIATES

in partnership with the

epi Educational Policy Institute

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IMPLEMENTING FASTTRACK ON CAMPUS

How do we implement *FastTrack* on our campus?

Colleges and universities can choose to implement ***FastTrack*** in one of three ways: 1) a completely in-house model; 2) an outsourced processing services model, and; 3) a two-phase model. With the in-house model, an institution takes full control of project implementation by assuming responsibility for all activities including inventory distribution and collection, data collection, management and analysis, and report production. Costs, apart from software acquisition, associated with this model depend largely on the institution's size, number of campuses and programs, and support staff salaries.

The outsourced services model requires that the institution only administer the two inventories to new students. All other aspects of project management are contracted out to Polaris Research Associates. The cost of this model depends on the number of freshmen to be surveyed and the type (student, faculty, counselor, standard) and number (based on number of programs) of reports to be printed. The price structure provided on the website can be used to calculate an estimated total cost.

The two-phase implementation model is a common approach for institutions who decide to adopt ***FastTrack***. In the first year the institution purchases all software setup, forms processing, data manipulation, and report production services from Polaris Research Associates. This is particularly true for those institutions who do not own OMR equipment as it eliminates the minimum $5,000-$10,000 hardware investment. In addition, costs associated with the support staff time required to manage the ***FastTrack*** implementation are minimized. Overall savings in this area can be substantial.

Once the first-year implementation phase is complete and experience with the ***FastTrack*** software has been gained, institutions then decide to either continue out-sourcing the support services or move to the in-house model. This is a starting point for decision making when considering implementation of the ***FastTrack*** system.

We are not ready to implement the system campus-wide, but we want to start somewhere. What can we do?

Institutions often decide to pilot implementation of ***FastTrack*** with a few programs to gain experience before the total campus becomes involved. Selecting these initial programs can be based on two criteria: 1) programs where faculty and staff are sympathetic to and understanding of the ***FastTrack*** philosophy (student success depends on how we interact with learners); 2) programs where dropout is a concern and there is a desire to change. To the extent these criteria can be/are used to select pilot programs, the more likely the implementation will be successful.

SOFTWARE LICENSE FEES & TECHNICAL REQUIREMENTS

What is the real difference between the single station and network version of the software? What is the argument for an institution to buy a network versus a single station license?

A single station license is ideal for smaller institutions who may use the system exclusively in a single department (e.g. counseling) or for institutions of any size who will have a single staff person dedicated to ***FastTrack***. A network version is appropriate when the institution intends to have several staff use the software system. In the latter case, the ***FastTrack*** implementation team may consist of a project coordinator, program faculty, counseling staff, support staff, and information technology staff.

What are the system requirements for the server on which the software will reside?

The software requires approximately 30MB of space and will run under Windows 95, 2000, and XP, but 2000 or XP is preferred. The database was constructed in Access with a VB user interface that does not require VB on the machine.

What are the system requirements for the client machines that run the network version of *FastTrack*?

The client software requires approximately 20MB of space and will run under Windows 95, 2000, and XP. Either 2000 or XP are preferred for performance reasons.

Is *FastTrack* compatible with other student information systems, such as Banner?

Data from a variety of sources, including mainframe student records, can be entered into segments of ***FastTrack*** designed to receive such files. Skills assessment scores and high school grades are two examples. Prior to loading, the data file must be in ASCII format.

ASSOCIATED FASTTRACK SERVICES

What do Help Desk services consist of? How do these services differ from the consulting services offered at an hourly rate?

Help Desk services are provided through telephone access to a ***FastTrack*** technical expert. This 24-hour service, designed to respond to clients' technical questions, is provided for a flat annual fee of $500. Help desk services do not include staff training, custom data analysis, report generation, or other forms of technical assistance; for these services, an hourly consultation rate of $100 applies.

The pricing structure includes a fee for database setup. What does

database setup involve?

Those using ***FastTrack***™ software must customize the database for their own institution, which requires loading institution-specific text/titles that will be incorporated into graph and report printing, entering PEI and SEI services report text, and setting up grades and basic skills test data tables. Additionally, importing existing datasets, including basic skills test data and mid-term and final grades, is included in this category. Each of these tasks should be completed at least once (or, in the case of entering grade data, twice) each year. These tasks can be outsourced individually as well—see “Database setup” in the ***FastTrack***™ 2006 Price Structure for more details. For institutions selecting the in-house model, detailed instructions are provided in the ***FastTrack***™ manual.

STUDENT INVENTORIES

What are the student inventories? What data do they collect on our students?

At the heart of ***FastTrack*** are two student questionnaires or inventories—the Partners in Education Inventory (PEI) and the Student Experience Inventory (SEI). Both inventories, designed as optical-mark reflex forms, measure student characteristics that are proven through research to be critical to identifying potential dropouts.

The Partners in Education Inventory, a 100+ item questionnaire administered at the start of the first term, provides a comprehensive profile of new student characteristics in terms of their demographics, high school background, attitudes, perceptions, needs, goals, and behaviors.

The Student Experience Inventory, a 100+ item questionnaire administered at mid-term, provides a comprehensive description of the characteristics and first-term experiences of each student including their support needs, attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors. These data act as an “early warning system” to identify both successful and unsuccessful students who are considering leaving college. Validation studies have shown this prediction to have an accuracy of 80%.

Are the inventories based on an assumed correlation between certain characteristics thought to predispose students to being at risk?

Yes. The inventories were developed based on Dr. Dietsche's research into student attrition in Canada and the research of others, including Tinto, Swail, Pascarella, and Terenzini. The key findings of this research are: 1) educational outcomes (departure, grades) are the product of an interaction between learner characteristics (e.g. academic aptitude, basic skills, goals, career interests, attitudes) and the learning environment he/she encounters; 2) this interaction results in a positive or negative experience for each learner and sets the stage for persistence/departure decisions; 3) the highest rates of failure and/or departure occur in the first year and retention efforts should focus on this period; 4) many who leave postsecondary institutions are in good academic standing and leave for reasons over which the institution has some control; and 5) effective retention/success programs track learners to identify those “at risk” and intervene with targeted, personalized strategies.

The inventories themselves are built around ten predictor variables, which are listed below. Approximately three to eight questions on each inventory are aligned to each variable.

Confidence in Success

Occupational Uncertainty

Value of Education

Prefer a Job

Financial Concern

Academic Behavior

Academic Need

Receptivity to Help

Educational Commitment (Desire to Complete Program)

Institutional Commitment (Perceptions of Institution)

How are the inventories administered?

Each inventory takes most students approximately 25-30 minutes to complete (35-40 min. for LEP students). The PEI can be administered to freshmen via the college application process as part of the application package, the orientation, or registration process, or in a classroom setting during the first week of classes. ***FastTrack*** users so far have chosen to administer the questionnaires in either an orientation or classroom setting. Each venue has its advantages and disadvantages depending on the culture of the specific college.

As part of the application process, the Partners in Education Inventory can provide useful applicant information such as geographic location, academic background, how they obtained information about the college and on what basis they decided to apply to/attend the college. These data are powerful in describing differences between those who applied, were made an offer of admission and registered versus those who applied, were made an offer but declined.

The SEI is typically delivered in a classroom setting at mid-term of the first year, although a college may choose to administer the inventory at another time.

Both inventories may be administered via the Internet or in paper format.

How do students access the web-based inventory and how do institutions pull this data into *FastTrack*. Where would the survey reside—on the institution's server?

The web-based inventory system can be housed on your institution's web server or on the Polaris Research Associates' server. Students would be directed by your staff or faculty to the website, where they would be asked to enter basic identification information (campus code, student number). If the inventory system is housed on the Polaris server, the inventory data would be exported as a .csv file to your institution, where it would be loaded into the ***FastTrack*** database by your IT staff or, if you prefer, by Polaris technical staff (service bureau fees would apply in this case).

We prefer to host the web-based version of the inventories on our

institution's server. What are its technical requirements?

The inventories will be provided to you in "php" format. In order to administer the inventories, your institution must have:

- A server to host the web survey;
- This server needs to have Microsoft MySQL database software installed (available as a free download from the Internet, but we understand that the administrator's function must be purchased) ;
- Server must also have php compiler (also available as a free download from the Internet).

We prefer the paper-based version of the inventories. What are the specifications for the OMR scanner required for the student inventories?

The student inventories are printed using Teleform software. Polaris Research Associates would provide you with the required scanning program for your scanner.

Once the inventories have been administered and the data uploaded into *FastTrack*, why is editing of the data necessary? Can this task be outsourced?

After inventory data have been loaded into ***FastTrack***, the data should be manually edited to correct missing or inaccurate data. For example, if a student provides his/her name on the PEI or SEI inventories but does not provide a correct student number, it is often possible to generate a list of student names and numbers from the college Student Information System. This task can be completed by the college or outsourced to Polaris.

REPORTS

What reports can be issued using *FastTrack*?

FastTrack™ reports for students, faculty, counselors, and administrators can be created by utilizing the "***FastTrack***™ Reports" utility that is part of the software system.

Student Reports: The Personalized Learning Plan is provided to every student at entry and again at mid-term. The content of each report is based on student responses to questions (Partners in Education at entry and Student Experience Inventory at mid-term) about their support needs in various areas. The report then presents each student with information on the specific support services they say they need at each point in time.

Standard Reports: Users can access, via a point-and-click menu, sixteen reports (7 from PEI, 9 from SEI) that only require specifying production parameters such as campus, program, or major before printing begins. All other aspects are pre-set.

Reports from the ***Partners in Education Inventory*** include:

a. Demographic Report: Provides a description of the new student population in terms of age, gender, first language, socio-economic status, main activity prior to enrolling, number of financial dependents, living arrangements, hours working, and citizenship status.

b. Academic Background: Shows the highest level of education attained by students, their study habits prior to entering college, the highest level of education desired and their high school study, class attendance and homework completion habits.

c. Recruitment Report: Identifies what students perceive as the major sources of information about the college, on what basis they chose to attend the college, and their attendance at various recruitment events such as Open House, Orientation etc. The Zip Code Report generated via the Custom Report utility shows the geographic distribution of the permanent home address for all new students.

d. Customer Service Report: Information on type of interactions students have with staff during the application, admissions, orientation and registration period.

e. Perception of Institution Report: Reports on students' attitudes re: their program, faculty and the institution more generally as they begin their studies. A reflection of their initial impressions of the institution.

f. Student Goals: Provides a breakdown of students' responses regarding possible reasons for attending college.

Reports from the ***Student Experience Inventory*** include:

a. Leavers Report: Ranks all students in an institution, campus or program in terms of their propensity to drop out at mid-semester. Validation studies show this report can accurately identify 8 in ten learners in this category.

b. Difficulties in College Report: Summarizes areas of the college experience that students find most difficult. Options include dealing with course content and workload, balancing the demands of studies with those of work or family, managing time, meeting with faculty outside class, dealing with policies and procedures and knowing who to talk to about a problem.

c. Perception of Program Report: Summarizes students' views of their studies regarding level of interest and degree of preparation for a future occupation.

d. Mid-Term Attitudes Profile: Summarizes students' attitudes regarding their confidence in success, occupational uncertainty, commitment to graduation and commitment to their institution.

e. Co-curricular Activity: Quantifies student participation in extracurricular activities such as varsity sports, clubs and their use of services such as academic advising, career counseling, language or math labs, and library or disability services.

f. Interaction with Faculty: Describes the quantity and quality of students' interactions with faculty.

g. Interaction with Peers: Describes the quantity and quality of students' interactions with their peers.

Custom Reports: A user-friendly tool is available when a non-standard report is desired. The report content is defined by the user and can draw from any data source.

Reports can be outsourced as a time-saving measure—see the list of report types in the ***FastTrack***™ Current Price Structure for more details. For institutions selecting the in-house model, detailed instructions on generating reports are provided in the ***FastTrack***™ manual.

DEMONSTRATIONS

How can I arrange for a software demonstration?

We can offer an onsite demonstration, led by one of our technical staff, at your institution. A speaker stipend, as well as travel expenses, will be charged to your institution. A more economical option is to arrange an online demonstration, which is offered at no cost. If you prefer, we can arrange to send you a CD with a single station demonstration version of the software and a sample database, along with some directions on its use, and allow you and your staff to explore the system. There is no charge for this option.

REFERENCES

Can we speak to another institution that has used the *FastTrack* system?

We are pleased to provide you with references upon request.