

## UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON REAPS 1,117% ROI WITH RIGHTNOW-BASED “ASK SHASTA” SYSTEM

The University of Houston faced a classic business challenge. The state continued to cut the UH’s budget by 5-10 percent annually. Yet, at the same time, UH had to successfully capture and retain students in the increasingly competitive higher education market.

It became essential for UH to “do more with less,” especially when it came to student-facing operations. Somehow, it had to improve the quality of the student experience while also reducing costs.

And that’s just what happened with RightNow. In fact, RightNow is saving the University around \$1 million annually by substantially reducing its phone and email workloads. That savings—which the University calculates based on the tremendous number of questions RightNow answers automatically via the web—doesn’t include the more difficult-to-quantify benefits RightNow has delivered by making UH staff more efficient. But it does add up to an impressive return-on-investment of around 1,117 percent every year.

At the same time, the RightNow-based system (dubbed “Ask Shasta” after the name of UH’s cougar mascot) is enabling UH to provide faster, better service to students and staff across all communication channels.

“RightNow has had a major impact on the quality-of-experience we are providing to all of our constituencies,” declares Betty Roberts, UH’s associate vice president of technology support services. “It has also allowed us to achieve significant cost savings during a period when such savings have been essential to our survival.”

### Too Many Phone Calls, Too Many Emails

UH began to look for a better way of handling communications with students and staff as a growing volume of phone calls and emails threatened to overwhelm its limited human resources. Subject-matter experts who had other responsibilities were constantly distracted by phone calls that frontline staff couldn’t answer. Students and prospective students would often have to make several calls to track down the answers they were looking for. UH even had to create an office called “OnCall” specifically to act as a clearinghouse for the information callers were seeking.

There were several issues contributing to the problem. As a thriving institution, UH simply had more students asking questions and more things for them to ask questions about. Also, as with all universities, UH had a wide range of information “domains,” including various academic areas, admissions, financial aid, and campus life. And UH was under-utilizing the web as a communication channel—which put additional pressure on its phones and email.

After seeing a presentation from a RightNow sales representative and checking the experiences of other universities using RightNow, Roberts was confident that RightNow’s technology could address the University’s communication challenges. She wrote specifications for a system that would provide UH with a searchable knowledge base that could be used on the web for unassisted support and internally to answer phone calls and emails.

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Vice President of Technology  
Support Services, University  
of Houston

Industry: [Education](#)

### Goals

- Reduce a near-overwhelming volume of phone calls and emails
- Deliver quality information to students and prospective students online
- Ensure the information given to people is accurate and up-to-date regardless of how they contact the university or who responds to their question

### Achievements

- 1,117% annual return on investment through workload reductions
- Consistent, accurate information available across all communication channels
- Subject-matter experts freed from having to field repetitive phone calls

“Several other vendors submitted proposals, but none of them could match RightNow in terms of either technical sophistication or proven success in the university world,” Roberts says.

## Preserving Departmental Independence

Once Roberts and UH acquired RightNow, the next question was how to best implement it. Universities tend to operate in a very decentralized manner, and UH is no exception. At first Roberts and her team contemplated giving each functional area its own RightNow interface. Early experimentation, however, quickly revealed that this approach wouldn't work. “Creating a bunch of totally separate knowledge bases would have defeated the whole point of giving people a single place to find their answers,” she explains.

Instead, a hybrid strategy was adopted. Each functional area had its own project liaison and content manager. Each could determine how to present the knowledge base within its individual area of the UH website. And each could determine how to use RightNow internally for phone and email. However, the knowledge base would be a common one, and search results would show users all relevant answers across all functional areas.

“We came up with a solution that allowed each area to maintain its independence without undermining the benefits of having a cross-university information resource,” Roberts boasts. “It really allows us to enjoy the best of both worlds.”

## Tangible Results Across the Organization

The first areas to implement RightNow were financial aid, the registrar's office, undergraduate admissions and IT. These were quickly joined by law school admissions and the undergraduate advisory department, with other groups slated for subsequent activation. Links to the Ask Shasta system were featured prominently on the UH home page, and it was promoted vigorously through UH publications and other programs.

All participating departments have experienced similar results. Use of the web by students and other constituencies rose dramatically from approximately 11,000 answers viewed monthly in the fall of the first year to almost 22,000 a year later. As a result, phone calls and emails have decreased

substantially—in some cases, as much as 25 percent. In addition, entry-level department employees can use the RightNow knowledge base to answer all kinds of questions instead of having to refer them to subject-matter experts. This saves UH even more money, while allowing department experts to focus on their primary work responsibilities.

Plus, because they've been reviewed and approved by assigned content managers, the answers given by phone, email and on the web are always consistent and accurate.

## ABOUT THE UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON

The University of Houston, Texas' premier metropolitan research and teaching institution, is home to more than 40 research centers and institutes and sponsors more than 300 partnerships with corporate, civic and governmental entities. UH, the most diverse research university in the country, stands at the forefront of education, research and service with more than 35,000 students.

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