

**Interview:**

*Tom Kokis*

*Director, Student Financial Literacy  
Berkeley College*

**Kris:** Okay so I'm Kris Alban with iGrad and I'm speaking to Tom Kokis at Berkeley College and I had the pleasure of seeing Tom present recently in Washington DC for an APSCU Default Management Conference and I thought what he was doing was some very ground-breaking things, had some very innovative ideas that have already been put into place and I really thought some other schools could kind of benefit from some of the ideas that he's had and some of the successes that they're having there at Berkeley College. So Tom...welcome, thanks for joining us.

**Tom:** Oh, thanks for having me.

**Kris:** No problem. The first thing I kind of want to get into is just hear a little bit about you. How long have you been at Berkeley College and a little bit about how you got there.

**Tom:** Sure. Well I'll be close to three years at Berkeley College in my current position as a Director of Student Financial Literacy. And how I got here was I was approached by my supervisor who I've known for a number of years and he, we, he was entertaining the idea of creating a team here at Berkeley to do outbound to borrowers to help them avert default but also to, provide workshops and counselling services to current students to help them better understand their student loan obligations and as well as, talk about other personal finance topics. So it sounded like a really exciting opportunity so I decided to come on board and essentially, start from the ground up so we've, that's how I got here.

**Kris:** Now it sounds like kind of what you do in there and some other schools have done similar things is, is the combination of a proactive and a reactive approach. The reactive being the outbound calling to students that, you've found have problems with their loans or they're delinquent, obviously not students but they're out of school by that point but also a proactive approach with these workshops and I'm assuming those are kind of, more of the financial literacy type stuff that's in your position title, is that correct?

**Tom:** Yes, yeah yeah. What I, I mean ideally, if, if we do our job on the upfront proactive counselling and providing information, we should see less activity in terms of the reactive, people because they have the equipment to manage their loans effectively, they're less likely to become delinquent on payments and at risk of being at default. So yeah it's a little both.

**Kris:** Okay. Now what kind of things are you measuring there? Are you looking strictly at default and delinquency or are there any other metrics that you're kind of focusing on and setting goals towards?

**Tom:** Well yeah, I think, the key things for us are how our efforts are impacting our rates. But, that's a metric that we can sort of track. It's not, it's not completely accurate but there is a way to track it. But also, we wanted to bring a value in terms of customer service to Berkeley students. You know we think what we're doing is unique, we're not the only ones and it's starting to become a trend in providing this kind of workshops in a more proactive approach to a student debt. So in that capacity I mean again, that's not something we can measure but we certainly

get a lot of “Thank you’s” and words of appreciation from students for the information that we be, been able to provide them.

**Kris:** Okay. Now what we kind of doing, the approach we kind of have is we’ll test out a lot of different things and kind of measure what’s working and what’s not. And every so often we’ll test something out and we think we’re just throwing it in basically to see, we don’t really think it’s going to be that effective but it turns out to get a lot of traction or so we start putting more focus on to building that out. So what’s one thing that you would say that you’ve got to put in place that has over-performed your expectations?

**Tom:** I would say the database that we are working from has helped simplify our workload tremendously and has made us much more effective. Before we had the database we were working with all the very servicer reports so there were three or four reports. And it was very difficult for the reps to manage all that, so now we, you know all has sort of collates them to the database so we have one source to do our outbound activity from and to measure it. So that’s really helped us make us more effective. We were reaching more borrowers, helping more borrowers. So it was the numbers from when we, before we started to when we initially implemented the database, they jumped dramatically in terms number of default aversion. So that certainly has been the key element in our success today.

**Kris:** So this, and I remember this a little bit from the presentation, the database you’re speaking about, so that’s pulling in information from, is it from NSLDS report and

**Tom:** Yeah

**Tom:** No it’s, well yeah NSLDS, the delinquency reports from the NSLDS, they’re the main source of our data, but we’ve been also pulling from two guarantors, New York and New Jersey, to get information on FFEL loans that are still outstanding that may be delinquent. So its three sources, but that’s sort of winnowing down to NSLDS as the other, as we move through the cohorts we’ll see fewer FFEL loans out there so at some point I guess we’re going to get all our data from NSLDS.

**Kris:** Okay and how many, how many people do you have working on this and what results have you seen?

**Tom:** Staff, including myself and associates we’re at five right now. Each person is assigned a piece of a cohort, if you will, to work. So they’re responsible for doing all the outbound phone calls, sending out emails and obviously responding back as people call in. You know again it’s been very effective because before we had three or four sources, separate sources of data on delinquencies that we had to go so it’s very hard for the reps to keep track of all that, so now they don’t have to cause it’s all in the database and as a result they become a lot more effective and spending the time on things that will make us effective maybe outbound, so we think their numbers are in terms of what we call cures of default aversions have increased substantially because they’re more focused on those issues.

**Kris:** And the five people you say are working on this, are they working full time, part time or they?

**Tom:** Full time

**Kris:** Full time, okay

**Tom:** Yep

**Kris:** And are those kind of student workers or just strictly, you found them outside of the school?

**Tom:** They're full time professionals. We had a couple of internal candidates that we brought on board and then we hired folks through a search and interview process. Yeah we're, they do, I mean they do more than just the outbound, there's a lot of presentations that are made, exit interview presentations, financial literacy workshops, so we needed folks who had some expertise in presenting on those topics as well as doing the outbound. So they're full time professionals.

**Kris:** So they're not doing the outbound full time, they're full time workers doing a lot of different things.

**Tom:** Correct.

**Kris:** So, if you have just to give a ball park percentage of the time that they attribute towards the outbound calling?

**Tom:** I would say three quarters of their time.

**Kris:** Okay, let's say there's another school that's looking to setup a similar program, considering the fact that you set this up and I'm sure you've had your share of trials and tribulations, what's the one piece of advice you would give to someone in that situation so that either they didn't make the same mistake as you or they got to from point A to point B a little bit quicker?

**Tom:** It's, well just, I guess get a sense of what the expectation is from the institutions at large for what you're charged to do, to what extent will you be focusing on the, on the outbound to delinquents and to what degree, how much would you be doing on the proactive side, and get a good sense of that. Because this will only work if you have a comprehensive strategy and that means you should devote equal time to both. And also I think it's important on the pro on the preventative side to get buy in on making it a requirement for students to attend or participate in whatever workshops or things like that so, because they don't show up, and that's been our challenge. I mean, it's not required, so it turns out as a challenge. So if you can get a buy in from the institution to make it mandatory, I think that would be key.

**Kris:** Yeah, I completely agree with that. In fact one thing I say in a lot of my presentations is that, even if you run the most successful incentive campaign out there and you somehow by some miracle get 80% of your students to go to a say financial literacy course because you've incentivized it, promoted it properly. Typically that 20% that had absolutely no interest that were, that are going to be the bigger problems in the future anyway, just because they don't have that interest. So I completely agree that at least some small part has to be made mandatory to get the students to at least accept the fact that this is something they need to pay attention to going down the road.

**Tom:** Oh yeah, I wholeheartedly agree.

**Kris:** So, where I kind of started with this is I was asking you if there's one thing that has kind of over-performed your expectations. One thing we found is that every once in a while we have this great idea and what we think is really great. And we launch it and it just kind of flops and it backfires. Well not necessarily backfires but we kind of expected it to perform a lot better than it did. So is there anything that you tried that you thought was going to be a lot more successful but just didn't turn out well?

**Tom:** Yeah, I would say everybody says you need to get on the social media bandwagon and put stuff out on Facebook and put my, and I tried and my experience with Facebook in posting information was that there was really not much of any interest from the students about that information. So I think we need to revisit that assumption about just putting something on Facebook will solve all your problems, or you'll get, you'll get the interest that you'll get some interest. My experience has not been that successful, so that was a disappointment.

**Kris:** Yes, it's not the magic pill that some of these sites claim it is to be. You know, it's different for every student population. Every school is different. But I mean we definitely know that you need to get to that point of traction where you have an engaged audience but to get to that point can take a full time staff in order to that and grow that...

**Kris:** Not this magic button that you just press and turn on social media and all of the sudden it's out there.

**Tom:** Yeah, I agree.

**Kris:** So what knowledge or skill outside your traditional scope of work or traditional job description has helped you the most in your current position?

**Tom:** Well I do have a background in working in student lending. I've worked for years at Sallie Mae, also at EdFund, so I have some, I had a good background in student lending. I think my experience is a working in a guarantee agency because they used to do a lot of, or they used to do a lot of the things we currently do, namely the delinquency prevention efforts or default prevention efforts. So that helped in terms of structuring, helping me get an idea of how we wanted to structure this and put it together. So...

**Kris:** Okay. And what is, what's one resource that you would recommend to other, other people in the industry? Whether it be associations like NCHELP or I guess its NCHER now not NCHELP anymore? Any specific websites or listservs or LinkedIn groups, we hear a lot of success in various places so I was wondering if you had any success with those or maybe something completely up higher that realm?

**Tom:** Well I think the the trade association APSCU was, is a good forum because its, they focus on our sector and because of that they understand the needs of the sector. So I, the fact that they are willing to host a whole symposium on default prevention is, I mean, that shows a sensitivity to the issue for their sector so, I think, the more, working with those associations has been very helpful. You get great ideas from schools, about what they're doing. And you're able, like I did, to share what we've been doing. So it's a nice forum to, to trade ideas and share war stories.

**Kris:** And one of the other things I noticed in your presentation at the APSCU Conference was talking about your efforts in exit counselling and I really like what you guys are doing as far as providing it in a variety of formats. Could you, could you talk about a little bit about the different types of things you're doing with exit counselling?

**Tom:** Sure. What we do sorts of formats, we do, the traditional presentation where, we send out our, we send out invitations to the graduating class and they choose from a number of workshops that we're offering and then we go and present. And they have always, they've been very successful and we only get really positive feedback from them. So that do, we're a quarter-based school so we'll do about every quarter I think we do about 35 workshops for the seven campuses. And then for our online school we do webcasts because really that's the only forum that, that's convenient for them. And we'll do two webcasts per quarter for the online population. And, again, very receptive, very positive feedback we get in in the web environment as well. And we, and we try to, obviously because our student body in the online school is an older population, most of them are working. We'll typically have those like later in the day like from six to seven.

**Kris:** Okay, so this webcast are, they're all live. Is that correct?

**Tom:** Right, yeah we can, we have a limit, I think it's 25 is the number of people who can come to the webcast and then yeah the presenter, I did one last week in fact, we use the same presentation we use at the workshop and its live voices. We use Sametime to share, share the presentation with the group.

**Kris:** Do you know what platform you are using? Is it GoToMeeting? or WebEx? Or...

**Tom:** Its part of Lotus Notes, its called Sametime.

**Kris:** Okay.

**Tom:** We used to be on GoToMeeting but we changed.

**Kris:** Is, so it sounds like all of the, the exit counselling efforts are in some way it's, it's a live presenter or live administrator. Is there anything else that you do to kind of cater to students that have difficulty making it to one of the scheduled sessions?

**Tom:** For the exits, we, if they don't attend the session what we do is mail them out a packet of information. And we also in the letter enclosed with the packet we reference the NSLDS exit website so if they want to go online and do an online counselling session, they can and we get the information on who completed the exits online. So that's another option for them. And within the packet we send them pretty much the information that we distribute during any live presentation so they, they have that information available if they can make it to the online webcast. So we try to appeal to all the different folks.

**Kris:** So you do the live setting. You do the, I would give them the option for the online counselling through the department and the written information as well.

**Tom:** Right.

**Kris:** It sounds like a pretty much covering all the bases there. And I think I asked at the end of the presentation if you had done any kind of tracking to see if there's any kind of preferences from the students on which has the higher completion rates, and I think you said you hadn't really implemented that just yet. Is that, is that the case or have you, have you started to see trends?

**Tom:** Well I, typically for the, we're at a point now where were getting about over, a little over a hundred people participate either in a webcast or in a in a live session. Which is if you were to break that out in percentage terms for the number of grads per quarter were at about 15 to 20% participation rate, which I don't think is that bad. So but I think the, we get we certainly seem to get a better turnout with the, with the live, workshop, face to face presentations. We offer more of them, so there's greater flexibility. So that I would say out of the hundred we get, 80 are from the live and 20 of the webcast.

**Kris:** Was there, just out of curiosity, was there a specific reason you were putting all the stock into the live administrator-based? Did you have an idea that those were going to be more effective? Or did you poll your students or is that just personal preference?

**Tom:** We started yeah, I think it's, we wanted, we wanted to move a little. We wanted to get more in their face if you will. Because I think, I think this over reliance on the web and web-based services to deliver this information is good. It's easier, it's more efficient but I think something gets lost for the student. I think the level of engagement in a face to face setting is so much more, at least in my experience, is so much more tangible. You know you can see their, you can see them, the Aha! buttons going, the Aha! moments and its very interactive so. I mean I'm a little old school it sounds I think we need to go back to that more. Because I think it's more effective now that, especially now when people are borrowing so much more money.

**Kris:** Yeah, I agree. I think what we're kind of noticing is with this influx of social media and all this online content, it's starting to, a lot of schools are jumping on that bandwagon with different various efforts and you're kind of starting to lose that direct touch with the students and that's actually becoming even more powerful because the students are so used to now that they are bombarded online information in different portals that their school is sending them to, so I think in a way that's good because that gives you the opportunity if you can actually have that direct contact with the students it actually, it resonates a lot more than maybe 10 or 15 years ago when there wasn't such significant online presence.

**Tom:** Yeah I think it's, that's, people would, or it's a reaction to all the, like you said, the bombardment of content they're getting. And I've seen students take the online counselling sessions and you can tell that they're just reading it to get through it, as oppose to understanding what they're reading.

**Kris:** Exactly.

**Tom:** You know.

**Kris:** There's a actually at, I was at a CASFAA event just last week and one of the, one of the presenters there said he just recently went through the Department of Education's exit counselling in the Spanish version and four minutes he got through it. And doesn't, he's never

taken a Spanish lesson in his life, he doesn't know any Spanish. So it goes to show, if you try to just get through it, it's not that hard to get through it and he basically, he obviously didn't pick up any information from it if he didn't understand Spanish so...

**Tom:** Right, right. Yeah people just click the right button, click the right button and just move it forward, without reading anything.

**Kris:** Exactly. I think, that was our our line of thinking too. We actually just finished producing a new exit counselling product and one of our reasons for that is a lot of the online stuff that's available now, we don't think it's that effective, we don't think there's a lot of retention that that students actually retaining that information. So what we've actually done, the way we've formatted it is completely video based and its, it shows various clips of students, or ex-students and talking about the mistakes they made with their student loan or wishing they paid more attention or the consequences of defaulting. So it kind of of has the "scare tactics" that students can relate to.

**Tom:** Right

**Kris:** We're very pleased with it but at the same time, I can see if you have the ability to have some direct interaction with the students that's always going to be more powerful.

**Tom:** Uh-hmm

**Kris:** One thing that I've heard some schools kind of have some success with is, just finding some upper level kind of financial literacy champions. Like a

**Tom:** Yup.

**Kris:** Like if you search you will find people within your organization that are extremely passionate about financial literacy. And the surprising thing is a lot of times you have to look outside the natural departments that you think would be a fit for that. But obviously if you can find senior level buy-in whether it's in the direct line for your department or not that's going to be very powerful in terms of getting things done and getting other people on the same boat.

**Tom:** Right.

**Kris:** if you didn't have any budget constraints whatsoever and all the time in the world, what would be your ideal plan?

**Tom:** Well, to have a staff large enough to implement a, a program where we did that kind of counselling, that proactive counselling where everybody is required coz right now if the school is to say you can do it with a staff of five for six campuses with classes starting every three months it would be almost impossible to do. You know, other things wouldn't get, other things that we do would not get done so I mean is, it's definitely more staff would be of, certainly help to implement the strategy.

**Kris:** And I think what you'll find too, is as you start shifting more of focus towards the proactive approach, its going to free up more time on the the follow up, the reactive side.

**Tom:** Right, exactly. Yeah.

**Kris:** It's almost like it may be 75% reactive 25% proactive now, but if another school is in the same situation, maybe, maybe they develop a plan where every six months they try to take an extra 5 or 10% and shift it to the proactive side. But obviously I am always been a big fan of tracking and matrix as well so, they that kind of thing really helps in those types of proposals that you mentioned. If you ever getting any kind of push back on making something mandatory or reallocating the budget, having matrix in place, even if it's a small kind of beta test with a group of students that you can show that these proactive efforts are are having an effect at your institution, you're going to get a much easier road in terms of trying to get what you want.

**Tom:** Right.

**Kris:** Alright Tom, well that's all the time we have for this week. Thank you again to Tom Kokis, director of Student Financial Literacy at Berkeley College. It was great speaking with you. And keep an eye out here at [iGrad.com](http://iGrad.com) for future podcasts. If you have an idea for a podcast or have a college administrator to suggest for one, send us a shout at [pr@igrad.com](mailto:pr@igrad.com).

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