

Educause 2001 – Indianapolis Current Issues Roundtable

Administrative Systems and Online Student Services

Moderator: Gene Spencer, Bucknell University

Today's students assume the Internet is the place to turn for all of their needs. Integration of online student services into the overall institutional e-business strategy of our institutions is critical. Can we define online services that match the campus service culture? Can we really put this power in the hands of the students, who might not know or agree with our data standards? How will we balance access with security? Who will get to define the ideal state? What relationships and partnerships will be required to develop these services? What does it mean for our organizations and who will lead the charge? Finally, will portals get us where we need to be? This roundtable discussion will address these and other issues related to the challenge of moving from managing transactions to directly serving students in an online environment.

To get the conversation rolling, I read a set of statements to the group, requesting that they raise their hand when they agreed:

- It's a great time to work in administrative systems!
- The change I see coming in our administrative systems is exciting!
- I look forward to stopping what I'm doing today.
- We need more partnerships with our administrative departments.
- We can't trust our students to enter valid data.
- I can't wait until we eliminate more middle managers here - they stifle our growth.
- Today's students look to the web first for service.
- We can lead in the transition to online services.
- I love change...
- Students know what students want.
- We struggle with the balance between access and security.
- 90% of our students should never need to go to the Finance Office!
- The functional offices know what the students want.
- I can't wait until our administrators join us in our work - and lead, not manage.
- Students don't want to be forced to think when accessing online services.
- The best ideas around here come from the "support staff"!
- 75% of our attention organizationally should be focused on online services.
- Forget the Registrar's Office -- it's worthless for the organization of the future or of today.
- I can describe our campus service culture in words our students would agree with.
- I can't describe our eBusiness strategy clearly.
- The students should lead in the transition to online services.
- I get excited thinking about the day when we can reach our undergraduates without having them come into an office somewhere.
- A portal will solve all of this.

Here are the comments that I recorded during the group's conversation at E2001:

Success stories:

- Integrating existing services in a single place for students;
- Many campuses are successfully using commercial web products from their ERP vendors;
- Students “love it” when their services are pushed out to the web;
- It's easy to add services incrementally;
- Having students do their own data entry is a “value add” because it reduces costs for overtime hours for staff and students love the convenience;
- Easier to have reporting functions; updating functions are more difficult;
- One campus reported a success in online registration that replaced an existing process that was “SO bad”;
- Places where parents are given access to the data (granted by the students) – the parents love it and the students love it;
- Online student evaluations – response went from 11 total for all courses with the paper system to an average of 11/course for the online system.

Obstacles:

- An institution with a culture of face-to-face services is struggling to reconcile online services with its residential college culture;
- Hesitancy to allow students to register without faculty guidance;
- Transaction costs on credit card payments – will it prevent adoption? (by the way, some institutions reported that there are good alternatives to credit card charges of 2%);
- Need to move from just reporting functions to more advanced updating functions (but requires highly customized code);
- The digital divide - especially an institution that serves economically disadvantaged students; how do you provide access to the services?

Concerns:

- The risk of having non-IT staff writing scripts;
- What does it mean when a student drops&adds without his/her advisor's permission (or signature)?
- When students “create” records – we need to have a way to handle duplicate records;
- How do you define the success of such a service?
- Volume testing to make sure a service scales up to the number of transactions when the service “goes live”;
- Stagger the load for different types of students or different segments of the population;
- One institution indicated that they started up a service in a “stealth way” - let students “find it” rather than announcing it;
- Plague of people needing to have their passwords reset.

Need to coordinate:

- Differing “pockets of vision” about online services – how to coordinate into a single voice;
- Matching student expectations with campus culture and the new eCampus culture;
- Bringing together a suite of services that could be offered to all campuses in a system;
- Getting the right group to design, plan and roll out such services are keys to success;
- Training for students; training for faculty advisors; tracking who does and doesn’t use the service;
- One campus reported successfully using students as the liaison to other students during the implementation and training processes.

Unintended Consequences:

- Everyone is more divorced from the process as it happens:
- How do you know when things aren’t working well?
- Students who “constantly ping” the system waiting until a closed course opens up.

Participants in the Discussion (or at least those who signed the sheet):

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