Chapter XXV
University Task Force Deepens Academic Involvement in ERP

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ABSTRACT

Kansas State University has ensured greatly increased academic involvement in the implementation of its new student information system through the use of an Academic Task Force. Consisting of Associate and Assistant Deans, each college of the university is represented on the task force to work directly with project management to review and revise university procedures as well as suggest system enhancements with the goal of melding the new system into the long term objectives of the university. This case study explores the evolution of the task force from its beginnings, springing out of an update session with an academic policy and procedure committee to the point that the task force eventually supplanted the Project Steering Committee as the primary conduit of information exchange between the project team and the academic community.

INTRODUCTION

Why do some IT projects result in success while others can range from "troubled" to outright failure? The stark contrast in results has been all the more obvious in the higher education environment where most institutions are moving from decades old legacy systems that were regularly modified according to user needs to prepackaged software available from a limited number of vendors. These monolithic Enterprise Resource Planning systems are performing mission critical functions to matriculate, enroll and process records for university students/customers but meet with varying degrees of success in their implementation.

Though many factors contribute to the success or failure of an IT project, more than any other organization type, higher education is especially dependent on collaborative implementation involving key stakeholders. As opposed to hierarchical structures in private enterprise, many universities are heavily oriented to the concept of shared governance and the notion of a student information system being unilaterally imposed upon the university community by the central administration would be anathema to that fundamental concept of shared governance.

The challenge is getting a truly collaborative environment. A steering committee is usually the chosen route for project governance, especially in the higher education environment. Steering committees tend be great for oversight, but also operate at such high levels that true collaboration often does not take place. They can be perceived, as the name implies, to be more autocratic than collaborative. K-State found that the best way to ensure collaboration was through a task force that would operate at a closer level to the decision ramifications. At the outset, both the steering committee and the task force were able to co-exist at different levels within the project. The steering committee addressed the broad questions ranging across all of the modules while the task force focused on preparing for the initial student enrollment in the new system. The foci of the two groups would merge as the first major implementation milestone of launching student admissions approached.

BACKGROUND

The LASER (Legacy Applications System Replacement) project was born out of an overarching vision of data sharing to replace the traditional silo effect of legacy systems (Fitzgerald, Rivenbark & Schelin, 2003). This vision was formalized into the Integrated Information Initiative, a ten-year plan to distribute information more widely among users with the appropriate "educational need to know". By breaking down silos of information and transforming the culture from one of data ownership to one of data stewardship, information could be more readily accessed by decision makers to better forecast and plan for future trends. The centerpiece of this initiative was the LASER project, an effort to replace the aging, mainframe-based conglomeration of disparate pieces including a student information system, a billing and receivables system and a financial aid management system among others.

Like most of its peer universities, K-State had maintained and modified these robust but functionally constrained systems for a quarter century or more and the core operating system had long since exceeded its useful life. Only by constant innovation and customization had the institution been able to maintain its cutting edge delivery of services to students and faculty. However, with the natural limitations of the application, combined with an ever-shrinking pool of labor with the necessary skill-set to maintain and push the boundary of the system's ability to deliver new functionality, it became clear that a replacement system would be necessary and a fully integrated ERP would be the system of choice. This choice would fulfill the desires of the administration for a comprehensive approach to data administration that would allow the university to break out of the silo mentality and make data available to far more users more effectively and efficiently.

The original system of choice was the Oracle Student System (OSS), which held the promise for adaptability in line with the vision of the Integrated Information Initiative. Although the OSS application held high Gartner scores for innovation, it was not sufficiently developed at the time to meet all of the needs of a "Top 25 Connected" university with an aggressive implementation timeline (Harris, & Zastrocky, 2005, K-State Media Relations, 2004).

Therefore, Kansas State turned to Oracle's sister product, PeopleSoft Campus Solutions™