Implementations that span entire college and university systems in three states

In 2001, Saundra Williams was hired as vice president for administration of the North Carolina Community College System. When she arrived NCCCS was beginning a massive IT implementation, and she was its new overseer. "I came from a university system, so one of the challenges was learning the culture of the community college system and how it would be affected by the project," Williams explains.

With 800,000 enrolled students statewide, all 58 North Carolina community colleges were standardizing on Datatel's Colleague. Colleague was purchased to run their human resources, finance and student information systems. The implementation was considered fully complete near the end of 2007.

Patrick Opatz is chief operating officer of Minnesota Online. He became involved while serving on the Minnesota Online Council as the budget director of Minnesota State Colleges and Universities (MNSCU). Launched in 2002, Minnesota Online enables a student enrolled at any of the system's seven state universities or 25 community and technical colleges to take a course offered by any of the other 31 institutions. Today Minnesota Online offers more than 200 programs and 1,000 courses.

Robert Hails has been involved in distance education for more than thirty years. He is the distance learning coordinator for the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education (PASSHE). He oversees several system-wide applications, one of which are collaborative tools related to distance learning used in some form on all 14 PASSHE campuses.

Getting everybody on board
Implementing the same technology across a multi-campus system is a combination of art and science. PASSHE, which enrolls 107,000 students, has been using collaborative online tools from Wimba for two years, but only with their most recent contract renewal do they have the participation of all 14 universities.

Now, consider 58 campuses. North Carolina Community College System has been rolling out Datatel's Colleague since 2001. Williams says enthusiastically, "We have completed the project! We are excited to say so." She credits much of that success to the support of all 58 community college presidents. Williams and her project steering committee made presentations at every quarterly presidents' meeting during the last six years, and Williams spoke to some presidents on a weekly basis.

"I wanted to help each president understand that the campus leader played a critical role in the project. Once they understood their role, several of them made structural changes at their campuses to better implement the system." More than one person close to this project can chuckle about North Carolinian attitude changes that progressed from 'Data-Hell' in the earlier days of the massive project to 'Data-Swell' as each successive campus came online.

Hails found that a byproduct of Pennsylvania's

The interviews begin on the following page. Hear directly from the principals: Saundra Williams, Robert Hails and Patrick Opatz.

By Florence Kizza
implementation was improved statewide communications. “At the System Office we use Wimba for meetings,” says Hails. “The most distant university is five hours away. So it’s not practical, or a good use of people’s time, to have them travel to Harrisburg frequently. Every week we have a meeting and some participants are physically here, but half participate via Wimba.”

Minnesota takes distant campuses up a level further with Minnesota Online.

More than 60,000 of MNSCU’s 374,000 students are using Minnesota Online, making it one of the larger U.S. online providers.

“A student can choose a mix of delivery methods,” explains Opatz. “One semester he or she may take all courses in the classroom. The next semester a hybrid course or an online course may be chosen. If a course isn’t available at a student’s home institution, an advisor is ready to help find comparable, transferable courses offered by other MNSCU institutions online. Minnesota Online does not provide the degree, but helps facilitate students getting the courses and programs they need.”

The Minnesota Online website is a home-built set of online tools maintained by the Office of the Chancellor. Those tools provide a statewide interface with Desire2Learn’s platform for online course delivery that is in use at each campus. When Minnesota Online launched in 2002, the campuses were using a variety of instructional management systems for their online offerings, including Blackboard and Angel. “Minnesota Online’s role has been to help facilitate the growth, quality and effectiveness of online learning in the MNSCU system,” says Opatz. (To read more about Desire2Learn, turn to Tom Robinson’s article on p. 20 of this issue.)

Challenges and setbacks
“With any new tool, training is necessary, and it can be a challenge,” Hails says of PASSHE’s Wimba usage. “I do a lot of training—phone calls, walk throughs, on-campus training sessions. For the two campuses that newly joined in the contract this year, the challenge will be supplying a variety of ways for their faculty to learn how to use the tool. I’ll be traveling.”

The MNSCU System Office does considerable marketing to demonstrate the value to campuses of the services of Minnesota Online. There is also the challenge of establishing a consistent and comprehensive strategy while serving large and small institutions. “Because we have such a wide array of institutions, we struggle with prioritizing needs,” explains Opatz.

Imagine discovering a major flaw halfway through a multi-year implementation. “Midway through, we discovered a serious design flaw that added 3 years and $3.1 million to the NCCCS project,” says Williams. “A whole component of the system had to be rewritten. We had 8 colleges up and moving forward when we found the problem. We had to stop the project, put 50 colleges on hold and work with the vendor to fix the project. We couldn’t bring other colleges up knowing a critical error was in the system. But it was fixed and we moved on.”

Moving forward
Now the hard part is over. The individual campuses in all three higher education systems are up and running a common system-wide technology. What’s next?

“We are going to expand our use of Wimba in conjunction with Blackboard, which has widespread use by our faculty for course management,” says Paul Bylaska, vice president for finance and administration at Clarion University of Pennsylvania, one of PASSHE’s fourteen. “Wimba adds real-time asynchronous communication, which should prove useful for on-campus students and faculty who may need an occasional technology boost, as well as our numerous distance ed students.”

Hails says that several PASSHE schools have upgraded their Wimba products. “Schools see value in spending money to make it easier and more accessible for faculty,” he says. “They dip their toe in. If it’s successful, they go further.”

For Minnesota Online, a next step is incorporating emerging technologies like gaming and simulations in their online courses. “We’ve provided some grant dollars to the colleges and universities, and they are providing ideas for using innovation dollars to develop simulation and gaming in online courses,” says Opatz. “We’re also finding ways to address the training needs of Minnesota businesses through online services. To do so we’re working with customized training representatives at each of our institutions.”

“We are into moving the project into its operation stage,” says Williams of NCCCS’ Datatel implementation. “And there are components that can be improved upon.”

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