



The very scary,
very expensive
and
very necessary
conversion to

Enterprise Resource Planning

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There comes a time in every IT director's life when the institution cannot bolt one more patch onto software that was designed—and probably purchased—many years ago. What is the tipping point that justifies trash canning the old and biting the multi-million dollar bullet for a modern Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) system?

Probably not just one. Consider data silos that cannot connect to generate a common report and shadow systems outside the view of key players' access. Drags on the department's staff to constantly create workarounds. Constant maintenance. Escalating consultant fees. Lost staff productivity. A hodge-podge of unnecessary licenses. And perhaps more importantly, the missed opportunities to strategically improve admissions, retention and fundraising.

Blytheco, a software consulting firm, has observed some typical mistakes many organizations make in evaluating ERPs.

- **Faulty Assumptions.** Deloitte & Touche found that the criteria and the priority order a first-time ERP conversion buyer listed differed from those doing it a second time. Initial price moved down the list.
- **Failure to calculate the costs of continuing to use the current system, including lost opportunity.**
- **Lack of definition of specific functionality needed: buying more than you need or the wrong package.**
- **Neglecting to involve staff in the decision who will ultimately have to run the operations.**
- **Choosing a consultant based on geography or old relationships.**
- **Undervaluing the long-term viability of the software vendor that can provide support, warranties, upgrades and so forth downstream.**
- **Realistically understanding budgets and timetables.**
- **Inadequate assessment of support needs before, during and after implementation.**

Jaime Klein, IT director at Southwest Wisconsin Technical College (Southwest Tech), struggled nine years to make the most of a complicated, patchwork system. But the never-ending expense, dependence on consultants, down time and problems accessing data and producing reports did not serve her growing community college. Further, Klein knew that revenue growth from continuing education and other programs was constrained because implementing convenient online registration wasn't feasible. It was embarrassing, too—after all, a technical college should be online.



Southwest Tech, along with two other tech schools, had formed a three school PeopleSoft ERP consortium. The host system was not located at Klein's school and changes required a two out of three vote. Obtaining timely information was a constant struggle. To increase control and minimize expenses, Klein wanted a Web-based system that required minimal tech support and easy training. She says, "Taxpayers know it's important that money be spent wisely. Once I knew that Southwest Wisconsin Tech could spend less and get more now and in the future... finding a better solution became an obligation."

Community colleges like Southwest Tech are finding themselves in the pincers of reduced funding—as much as 20-25 percent—and unnerving student population growth. The diverse nature of the student body and complexity of running multiple campuses adds to the demands for efficient data management.

Following significant study and soul searching, Klein convinced her administration to abandon the current Oracle PeopleSoft ERP and replace it with a more manageable, nimble and easily understood Microsoft-based system, in this case, CAMS Enterprise by Three Rivers Systems. Other major players include Campus Management, SunGard Banner, Jenzabar, and Datatel.

A totally integrated academic ERP solution relies on shared data and shared applications. Application sharing allows essential functions like registration, course management, portals, financial management and development to work seamlessly. Uniform base technology helps all functions look, feel and operate the same way. Eliminating multiple interfaces saves manpower, reduces hardware needs and expedites implementation. Being Web-based, the cost of owning and maintaining, and the environmental impact of multiple servers on campus is minimized.

Klein cannot point to another college that has plowed this territory. Although Three Rivers Systems has converted campuses from other major ERP vendors, this will be the first ever conversion from PeopleSoft to CAMS. Ease of implementation is a major reason Klein chose this system. Yet, the process typically takes six months to a year, depending on the size of institution and is iterative, i.e., a design methodology based on



Southwest Wisconsin Technical College

ERP Conversion Motivators

- Problems accessing data
- Expensive system updates
- Frequent downtime
- Dependence on consultants
- Steep learning curves for power users and occasional users
- Difficulty producing reports

ERP Conversion Milestones

- Project start-up
- Project planning
- Technical consulting
- System installation
- Training
- Data migration
- System set-up
- Process verification
- System go-live

a cyclic process of prototyping, testing, analyzing, and refining. Installation, training and data conversion have to be carefully synchronized. Since the new system is Web-based, with familiar functionality like point-and-click access and drop-down menus and familiar terminology, training time for Southwest Tech staff shouldn't overly burden staffers already strained by increasing enrolments.

While Southwest Tech's data is being converted, the community college's staff is working with a fully loaded sample database to learn the system. Klein started phase-one training with a core team from admissions, registration and billing. Mastering mock exercises in areas such as registration, financial aid and student records builds system skills which can be easily transferred to other departments. When this initial training is complete Southwest Tech participants will have taken a hypothetical applicant through the entire student lifecycle—from admissions to alumnus status—and produced the associated reports and documents. Departmental cross-training is painless given an intuitive user interface. Staff trained in recruiting, for example, can readily adapt those skills to any

other area, such as student information.

Then when the data migration is completed, another round of training will take place using "real" data. Second-round training rounds do double duty. During these sessions, Klein's co-workers can verify data as they refine their system skills. Knowing verified data is there, is correct and waiting for them, gives Klein and Southwest Tech leaders an added boost of confidence before the system goes "live."

Southwest Tech will go live in phases. The student CRM system will be operative in June 2010 and then be followed by the financial system in July. Klein projects saving between \$200,000 and \$300,000 annually and knows that the new system can be easily and efficiently scaled as the school grows. She's also counting on revenue growth from alumni and adult continuing education online solicitations and registration.

Amir Tajkarimi, founder of Three Rivers Systems sums it all up saying, "It's rewarding to us when we can help a college like Southwest Tech worry less about IT issues, so it can concentrate on its mission of providing a great college experience for students." **TC**