

Case Study: Boston College Reaches for the Cloud

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Summary: Faced with exploding costs of processing ever increasing admissions paperwork, Boston College adopted a novel, Cloud-based approach. The school teamed up with a Boston-based SaaS provider, FolderWave to replace its manual, paper-based admissions system with an electronic folder-in-the-cloud solution. The results underscore the importance of delivering early success, and staying focused on business outcomes. In researching the details of this case study, Andrew Dailey of MGI Research spoke at length with Rita R. Owens, Executive Director for Academic Technology at Boston College. Rita led the project that created the new system and she gave us a firsthand account of implementing a cloud-based solution for a higher education organization.

Key Issues

- Is Cloud Computing a Zero-Sum game?
- How will user strategies for cloud computing evolve?
- What is the role of central IT vis-à-vis Cloud Computing?
- What are the key enablers and barriers to cloud computing?
- What are the best practices for evaluating and adopting Cloud Computing?

Profile of Boston College

Boston College is one of the oldest Jesuit, Catholic universities in the United States. With over 14,600 total students enrolled in 8 schools and colleges offering 22 degree programs, Boston College was ranked among the top ten private universities by applications (Source: NY Times, 2010). Boston College has experienced tremendous growth in recent years, including a 75 percent increase in undergraduate applications over the past decade. During the same period, a remarkable increase in revenue from voluntary giving has helped to move the University's endowment to approximately \$1.8 billion, among the 40 largest in the nation.

Andrew Dailey: Rita, you personally spearheaded an effort to revitalize key departments and processes at Boston College. What motivated this effort?

Rita Owens: We were faced with increasing regulation and oversight requirements, rising numbers of applications for admissions and financial aid, and a growing deluge of paper and electronically submitted forms. Our professional staff was spending more and more time dealing with paper and student folders. We knew we needed to find a way to a) streamline key processes at the university; b) implement a scalable solution; and c) achieve some quick success that we hoped would snowball into a larger effort. We had an executive mandate to examine key processes, and see how we could not only make them more efficient but really re-think how things could be done better.

Andrew Dailey: Where did you start, and why?

Rita Owens: We started with financial aid, and in retrospect, we could have just as easily started with admissions. Financial aid is such a core part of what we do. We chose financial aid because the “avalanche” of paper was growing ever larger, and consuming more and more physical space. At the same time, we wanted a way to integrate with our existing student information system (SIS), which we did not want to have to replace. We believed that if we could get that right, it would be possible to replicate the solution and success to other areas of the university.

Andrew Dailey: What were the primary goals of implementing the new admissions system at Boston College?

Rita Owens: We had three goals in mind. First, we wanted to streamline processes at the university, and provide our professionals with the best tools so they can do what they do best. Second, building an extensible, scalable solution was critical. Third, we needed a solution that could be integrated into our existing IT systems and one that would not require a massive amount of training.

Andrew Dailey: What were the specific objectives?

Rita Owens: We had five major objectives for this project:

- Address the explosion in paper and files created by financial aid and admissions processes
- Create a scalable system to handle the significant increase in admissions and financial aid applicants
- Provide tools for Admissions and financial aid officers without major training effort
- Reduce the total time needed to process financial aid and admissions applications
- Establish a higher level of security to maintain and monitor sensitive information

Andrew Dailey: What solutions did you consider?

Rita Owens: Several. We considered enhancing our existing SIS/ERP system, and even looked at replacing it. Both options looked expensive, and more importantly, didn't convince us that they would be the best fit for the business. We also investigated document-imaging systems, and concluded that we needed to have more than base technology. We wanted a true solution with some help with our processes. In the end, a web-based solution looked like the best option, even though the vendor was relatively unproven at the time.

Andrew Dailey: Which solution did you select?

Rita Owens: We subscribe to a cloud-based solution called FolderWave. They were willing to work with us to deliver a solution that fit our processes and didn't require either a huge capital investment, or a major re-training of our people.

Andrew Dailey: What attracted you to FolderWave?

Rita Owens: It was several things. First, they understand business processes, and really wanted to learn our processes and help us improve them. Second, it was the only system that we believe is both extensible, and scalable. That was really important for us. And they didn't force us to abandon our existing processes or systems – that made it much easier for our financial aid folks (and later our admissions team) to embrace the system.

Andrew Dailey: What have been the results?

Rita Owens: We respect our students and their families. They place a lot of trust in Boston College, and in turn, we, as an institution, do our best to honor that trust. With financial aid, there are always lots of questions – and by being able to quickly, and confidently respond to an applicant's or an enrolled student's inquiry (or from their family, for example), we are also sending an important message.

Profile of FolderWave

Target Market:

- Higher Education
- Solution:
- SaaS+.
- A cloud-based end-to-end software, workflow, document management and hosting solution to manage both the large volume of information and complex processes facing modern institutions of higher learning.

Ownership: Private

HQ: Westford, Massachusetts

Web: www.folderwave.com

When we are trying to recruit students, reliably answering financial aid-related questions helps distinguish Boston College and has helped us up the ante, so to speak. What used to be a back-office function is now part of a very engaged, switched-on front-office service.

From an internal perspective, our professional staff has been able to handle a significant increase in applications, without having to increase the size of the staff or dedicate more time.

Since the introduction of FolderWave, our financial aid and admissions officers have been able to spend more time on what they do best, and less time dealing with paperwork.

The difference is noticeable in that a portion of prime real estate on campus was dedicated to maintaining and storing financial aid, admissions, and student files. Today, those files are now stored “in the cloud” – electronically.

Andrew Dailey: Aren’t you worried about cloud security?

Rita Owens: We take security very seriously. Our ITS [Information Technology Services] security team put FolderWave through a rigorous security selection and audit process. Our environment today is as secure, or even more secure, than before. Today we have the ability to monitor and log every event.

We know exactly who accessed what files, when, and instead of paper folders sitting on desktops, now we can carefully manage access rights. It’s essential to us, and having a cloud-based solution like FolderWave enables us to manage security and system access appropriately.

Andrew Dailey: What has been the result of using FolderWave for Admissions?

Rita Owens: The academic calendar is unusual, in that major events transpire inside a pre-determined timeframe. For university admissions, acceptance letters go out on a fixed date and a tremendous amount of university resources are associated with the make-up of the incoming class.

FolderWave has helped make our processes more efficient – it virtually eliminates wasted time and unnecessary/redundant tasks, and by doing so, gives our admissions officers more time to do what they do best.

It’s like having an extra week to study for an exam – FolderWave gives us a productivity boost, and as a result we’re in a much stronger position to achieve better admissions outcomes. We have more time to shape the incoming class – and then once students matriculate, we have an electronic folder that follows the student through Boston College.

Andrew Dailey: What benefits were you expecting from the new system and what did you realize in the end?

Rita Owens: There are several benefits, although at the time we did not know what we know now. So, in hindsight, our expected and realized benefits are:

- Strengthen the trust that students and their families place in the institution
- Increase the amount of time the admissions department has to focus on acceptances and shape the incoming class
- Reclaim prime real estate

Andrew Dailey: Have you extended the use of FolderWave beyond Admissions and Financial Aid?

Rita Owens: Essentially, FolderWave gives us a single, digital version of what used to be paper processes and silo'ed software systems. The FolderWave cloud now also covers graduate admissions, inquiries, and other administrative functions.

Andrew Dailey: Can you share with us the number of FolderWave users today?

Rita Owens: I can't provide a precise figure, but our FolderWave cloud covers hundreds of people on campus, and includes the Office of the President. We have complete processes that are enabled by FolderWave – in one cloud we have document management, workflow that matches our processes, system updates, etc. It even takes care of scanning non-digital documents, like physical letters of recommendation, and placing them in the right digitized folder.

Andrew Dailey: Have you calculated the ROI of using FolderWave?

Rita Owens: We have, and let's just say that we are delighted with the results. We've been able to handle a sizeable increase in applications and increase everyone's satisfaction with improved processes. We expect to keep expanding the use of FolderWave.

In addition to the financial benefits, the increased productivity and process clarity that have come from using FolderWave are extremely valuable to us. Without overstating it, we've revolutionized what used to be a time-consuming, paper-based process, and transformed our time to delivery.

Andrew Dailey: What was the biggest surprise using FolderWave?

Rita Owens: Dealing with an agile company like FolderWave forced us to up our game. Everyone says they want to "partner" with a solutions provider, but with FolderWave we found a team truly committed to our success. A cloud-based system is not something ephemeral or conceptual – it was a hands-on experience with FolderWave.

Andrew Dailey: Rita, thank you very much for your time.

Rita Owens: You are welcome!