



College Boosts IT Services, Builds Community, with Information Management Solution

Overview

Country or Region: United States
Industry: Education

Customer Profile

Tallahassee Community College (TCC) was founded in 1966. It offers high-quality post-secondary education for more than 15,000 students in Florida. TCC employs 170 full-time faculty and 600 administrative staff.

Business Situation

TCC's IT infrastructure did not support campus-wide collaboration or communication, which diminished the availability of services to students and administrative efficiency.

Solution

TCC deployed an integrated server and desktop-based information management solution that uses the 2007 Microsoft® Office system as the foundation for enhanced campus collaboration.

Benefits

- Improves access to information for faculty, staff and students
- Improves individual and team productivity
- Drives business intelligence
- Encourages interpersonal connections
- Helps generate new ideas for

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Tallahassee Community College (TCC) offers high-quality education at low cost to students in Florida. The college wanted to provide better IT services and information management solutions to faculty, staff, and students to improve the learning environment. To that end, TCC deployed an integrated solution of Microsoft® server and desktop technologies that make it easier for students, faculty, and staff to find, share, and use information efficiently. Using the Microsoft Office Professional Plus 2007 programs to access data and to connect with others on a central portal, faculty, staff, and students are improving collaboration, streamlining processes, and making better use of college data. TCC's new strategic information management solution has turned the college into a more cohesive, productive campus community.



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Situation

Located in Florida’s capital, Tallahassee Community College (TCC) is the feeder school for Florida State University and Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University. For the 2005–2006 school year, TCC ranked 19th among two-year academic institutions in the United States for the number of associate degrees it awarded and 11th nationally for the number of degrees it awarded to African-Americans.

TCC prides itself on maintaining the lowest tuition fees of any college in Florida. Despite having a tight budget, IT management saw the benefits of upgrading the college’s IT infrastructure to provide better services, including improved information management. A successful, productive college environment requires a smooth flow of information and online collaboration among the constituents who make up the campus community. For board members, faculty, staff, and students, individual productivity requires powerful desktop tools that facilitate information access.

Before early 2007, however, TCC didn’t have a unified online environment through which students could manage important information about college life. They had to remember three separate passwords to access course grades and curriculum requirements, financial aid status, and registration forms from a third-party database system called EagleNet, and a fourth password to use a Web-based course-management system. The IT department had to manually administer these passwords for 15,000 students.

Faculty and staff members faced similar problems trying to find information stored among data silos and directories on the college’s Novell NetWare network drives.

“We had no single place to publish information or go to for administrative forms,” says Bill Campman, Vice President of Information Technology at Tallahassee Community College. “And there was no established, automated workflow for processing those forms.”

As a result, TCC administrative staffers performed unproductive, repetitive work that took time away from more important duties. For example, during a typical recruitment process, TCC Human Resources (HR) employees spent hours processing paper applications, creating and sending letters, and forwarding applications to the appropriate hiring committees.

The college’s 40-member IT department spent a lot of time responding to information requests from faculty and staff. IT staffers had to perform manual extracts to the college’s MySQL database, but it was not optimized for reporting. “People cut and pasted the data into [Microsoft Office] Word documents and distributed them to the board, faculty, and staff using e-mail,” recalls Campman. “This was inefficient. Meanwhile, everyone was eager for more information to perform trending analyses and to make better decisions about helping our students be successful.”

To establish an optimal setting for its strategic information management solution, TCC needed to upgrade and standardize its infrastructure. The college was running the Novell NetWare operating system to host its GroupWise messaging solution, and it used eDirectory for its directory services. Faculty and administration used a combination of Macintosh computers and personal computers running the Windows® XP Professional operating system and Microsoft® Office XP Professional or Microsoft Office 2003 Professional Edition.

To achieve a more productive, collaborative environment, Campman developed a strategic information management plan. "We wanted to improve the faculty, student, and staff user experience," he confirms. "We needed to focus on delivering the best suite of desktop tools for our constituents, and we needed to build a unified portal to support campus-wide collaboration."

Solution

For the IT staff, it came down to deciding between an open-source solution or an integrated stack of Microsoft server and desktop technologies. "Our tuition is already very low, and we are facing a 4 percent budget crunch in the State of Florida, which affects our operating budget," explains Campman. "We wanted to boost administrative efficiency and achieve costs savings, while offering better IT services to students and faculty without straining our budget."

Campman and his team chose the Microsoft server and desktop option. The team based its decision on the solution's level of integration and competitive price point. "We looked at Crystal Reports, and the costs and training were out of line with my staff and budget," Campman recalls. "The Microsoft suite of products offered the most cost-effective option, with all the capabilities we needed to provide the staff and faculty with the information they need."

For the college's desktop productivity software, Campman chose Microsoft Office Professional Plus 2007. To develop a campus-wide communication and collaboration framework, Campman chose to build a portal solution based on Microsoft Office SharePoint® Server 2007. "SharePoint Server 2007 comes with collaboration and social networking

capabilities built in, and it's seamlessly integrated with the information management and workflow capabilities of the new 2007 Office programs," continues Campman. "Together, they form the foundation of our strategic information management solution."

Deploying the Information Management Infrastructure

Tallahassee Community College worked with Microsoft Gold Certified Partner Idea Integration to optimize and roll out the new, simplified infrastructure. In January 2007, it began by deploying Microsoft products that would play a supporting role for the new information management solution. First, it migrated the college's back-end infrastructure from its Novell environment to the Windows Server® 2003 operating system.

Then, in March 2007, Campman's colleague John Burch, Director of Management Information Systems at TCC, deployed Microsoft SQL Server® 2005 database software. Burch used SQL Server Integration Services to extract operational data from SQL Server and build a data warehouse that individuals can query through their Microsoft Office programs. "We were able to save approximately \$50,000, as we were licensed already for Microsoft SQL Server products," says Campman.

Around the same time, TCC migrated from GroupWise to Microsoft Exchange Server 2007, and replaced eDirectory with Active Directory® services, a central component of the Windows Server operating system. Between March and June 2007, the IT team set up 99 percent of the faculty and staff with the new messaging environment, which employs the Microsoft Office Outlook® 2007 messaging and

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collaboration client included in Office Professional Plus 2007.

The IT team is deploying Office Professional Plus 2007 to individual desktops and to some departments as a whole, upon request. The team has also installed Office Professional Plus 2007 in some of the student computer labs. To date, approximately 2,000 users, or 75 percent of the faculty and staff, are using Office Professional Plus 2007.

Implementing Two Campus Portals

Campman and his colleagues then built two portals, one for faculty and one for students, using Office SharePoint Server 2007. The portal for TCC faculty and staff is called TCC Port, and it provides access to campus e-mail and online TCC services. TCC Port also houses departmental forms, archives content created by faculty and staff, and includes team meeting sites and personal sites.

The portal for students, TCC Passport, consolidates the functions previously available in EagleNet under a single sign-on. Active Directory provides user authentication so that IT staffers are saving time managing passwords. The site is a one-stop shop for students to manage their college life. It provides access to class registration, scheduling, academic planning/advising, tuition payment, transcripts, graduation status, e-mail and teacher communication, and financial aid.

TCC decided to standardize not only its intranet software, but also its server hardware. The college chose Dell PowerEdge Servers, as it had been leasing Dell hardware for nearly a decade. “By leveraging Dell Financial Services for a lease, we were able to deliver a complete solution during a single fiscal year,” says Campman.

Fully functional by the end of May 2007, TCC’s student portal was pilot tested by a group of 500 summer students and rolled out in October 2007 to all 15,000 students. “We have come so far in six months that other colleges are finding it hard to believe,” says Campman. “Working with Idea Integration was extremely helpful. They came in and got things started so that we were able to learn what we needed to progress quickly. And Microsoft technologies provide many out-of-the-box capabilities and seamless integration, which also helped us save time.”

Ease of use was a key factor in building the sites quickly. Staci Mildenerger, Assistant to the Vice President for Information Technology at Tallahassee Community College, used Microsoft Office SharePoint Designer 2007 to create and customize all the content for the TCC Port, and she is also responsible for administrating the site. “It was very intuitive,” she recalls. “I didn’t have any direct training. I just used the books and online resources from Microsoft. It’s been a great experience.”

Driving Adoption

Mildenerger has demonstrated to other employees how easy it is to work with SharePoint-based tools, creating a groundswell of user adoption among the faculty and staff. The Vice President of TCC’s Pat Thomas Law Enforcement Academy, for example, sat down with Mildenerger and immediately designed a project-oriented site for a new safety and security committee that includes task and document management, timelines, and Gantt charts. Other team sites have also sprung up for tracking government grant activities, managing committee/project work, creating meeting agendas, and sharing and reviewing budget information.

“Because Microsoft products are so intuitive, we immersed the staff in the technology and this increased its use across campus,” Campman says. “We also provided training for Office Outlook 2007 during the migration from GroupWise, and we did some proactive education around the Microsoft Office Compatibility Pack for Word, Excel®, and PowerPoint® 2007 File Formats to help address file compatibility issues. So far, we haven’t heard of any difficulties.”

Benefits

Tallahassee Community College has already benefited from its integrated Microsoft solution to improve access to information, increase personal and team productivity, make better use of college data, and encourage personal connections. “One of the guiding principles of our college is that we must help students get to class in the best condition for learning,” says TCC President, Dr. Bill Law. “Having these tools available to faculty, staff, and students is fundamental to being able to meet this goal.”

Provides Easy Access to Information

The TCC IT management team included Office Professional Plus 2007 in its strategic knowledge management solution because it saw how faculty, staff, and students could use the Office programs to link back to information contained in server-based systems and portals.

Employees in the Academic Affairs office are already using Excel Services to extract information from the data warehouse to create the Dean’s List of honor students. Instead of calling IT to retrieve the names from the old system, they enter simple parameters such as dates and names and use Excel Services to export the list into Office Excel 2007. Then they use Office

Word 2007 to merge that data into a template, and they are ready to go.

“Extracting and cleansing this data used to take days for IT,” recalls Burch. “With the 2007 Office system, Academic Affairs staff can take care of their own information needs. Now, creating the Dean’s List only takes an hour or so—and it took next to no training.”

According to Mildenerger, “We do this three times a year. The process before this took one week from start to finish, representing a forty-fold time savings each time around.”

As the TCC Passport portal provides a single place for students to access everything they need, students are more likely to engage with the services and offerings available on campus. “Now, with just one login, it saves me time when I want to access my e-mail and my advising information,” says one journalism student. Internal usage statistics confirm the site’s popularity. The day after mid-term grades were released, more than 8,388 unique students accessed the portal. Just before finals, that number reached 10,000 students—66 percent of the entire student body.

Improves Individual and Team Productivity

TCC IT management liked the new Microsoft Office Fluent™ user interface, immediately recognizing how users would save time and work more productively. “Faculty members are taking advantage of the 2007 Office enhancements to individual programs to deliver better results,” says Campman. “They are also using the redesigned but familiar interface to gain access to information and streamline business processes.”

Mildenerger likes the new interface, and she appreciates the rich data visualization

Data Driven Interaction

Data will drive the "Flow" of the SKMS system. The data will be made up of these and other sets of information:



Figure 1. The use of SmartArt graphics, demonstrated in this PowerPoint slide, is becoming more prevalent in TCC presentations.

and multiple filter and sorting levels in the Office Excel 2007 spreadsheet program. She uses Excel 2007 to analyze data such as the ethnicity and age of applicants for positions at the college. "We have to send this data to the state to demonstrate that we have a sound diversity policy at the college, and this helps HR comply with those regulations," she says.

Burch reports that many faculty members and some students are already discovering the powerful graphics engine in the Office PowerPoint 2007 presentation graphics program to produce more compelling presentations for use in the classroom and online. (See Figure 1.) "Faculty and staff are beginning to use the SmartArt™ graphics capabilities to embellish their presentations for meetings," he says. "Some of our instructors are starting to use PowerPoint presentations stored on the course management site."

Improved productivity and tangible time savings are evident across the campus,

thanks to the out-of-the-box integration between Office Professional Plus 2007 and SharePoint Server 2007. For instance, TCC faculty and staff recently screened 212 applications for 12 open faculty positions using a significantly streamlined process. The faculty job application forms were redesigned using the Microsoft Office InfoPath® 2007 information-gathering program and made available online. When an applicant submits the online form, it is delivered through a Web services workflow to a document library on the college's HR site, where it is reviewed and then sent on to the review committee for a final decision on the applicant.

"At this point, there are three different workflows a person in HR can initiate within SharePoint Server to execute in Outlook," explains Mildenerger. "We can send a thank you letter to the recipient, we can send a request for more information, or we can forward the application to the appropriate committee site for review. For those 212 applications, each step would have taken many hours to complete. Now it happens automatically, in minutes."

Mildenerger estimates that this first-time use of InfoPath and workflows for the faculty hiring process saved the college roughly U.S.\$10,000 in time and material costs. "This savings will grow exponentially when everybody uses this workflow," she adds.

Drives Business Intelligence

When Burch and his team created the data warehouse, they knew that 2007 Office capabilities to reach back to the data and deliver it to the desktop in a familiar, useable format would unlock information for staff and faculty. Excel Services, for example, is an Office SharePoint technology that makes it simple for TCC staff to use, share, secure, and manage

Office Excel 2007 workbooks as interactive reports that link back to live data in Burch's data warehouse. The reports are even available through a Web browser.

"Thanks to Excel Services, TCC faculty and staff can access data in minutes instead of hours," Burch confirms. "This is going to be very important, because we have a lot of people that know Excel very well, and they can use a familiar tool to do online analytical processing cubes and cross tabs in an easy-to-understand format. And it's important to IT because it's going to free our staff from compiling statistics to do more strategic work."

Campman adds, "We have always had a huge demand from staff and faculty to look at student performance. As we develop the analytical models for course history and grades, we will finally be able to track and analyze student performance against a number of parameters. Our Microsoft solution is going to help us improve college offerings and provide better service."

Even the Tallahassee Community College Board of Trustees conducts its monthly workshops and meetings on an Office SharePoint Server 2007 portal. The March 2008 meeting used Excel Services to provide the Board with snapshots of the budget with editable parameters. This made it possible for the trustees to simulate and view the budgetary impact of their decisions so they could vote on motions with a better understanding of the financial issues.

Encourages Interpersonal Connections
The underlying impetus for TCC's integrated Microsoft strategic knowledge management solution is to improve communication among campus constituents to promote a collaborative learning environment.

"TCC staffs are as excited about the social networking features that come with Office SharePoint Server 2007 as the students are," reports Campman. "We are rolling out wikis and blogs to the faculty and staff portal right now. Students will have MyTCC sites to create blogs and share files, documents, and pictures. Faculty and students can also share their Outlook 2007 calendars to connect more easily with each other and better manage their time. "

Helps to Generate New Ideas for Collaboration

Improved services and access to information for faculty and staff are just the beginning of the benefits that TCC is experiencing from its information management solution. The IT team is planning to create a streamlined student admissions process using InfoPath 2007 forms. It is also integrating a dashboard into the student portal to display personalized student information like grades and GPAs.

"Microsoft Office and SharePoint technologies have provided the foundation for a rich knowledge management infrastructure that TCC can evolve and develop to meet our strategic goals," concludes Campman.

For More Information

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