

Four SIS-Related Chores You Can Do Without

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No doubt your institution relies on its student information system, or SIS, as the absolute go-to system for key student data. As such, your SIS should contain and deliver the most accurate, up-to-date information about students and student-related actions, transactions, updates and decisions. I say “should” because SIS sometimes fails to be that kind of foolproof system. That’s because, in practice, shortsighted deployment strategies combined with manual, labor-intensive operations often create frustrating barriers to optimal SIS performance and user effectiveness.

Those barriers are most apparent when SIS operates in isolation from other systems and information sources with which SIS users interact. Those other systems and sources include any of the electronic or paper-based avenues through which student-related documents come into the institution to then be stored, retrieved and acted upon. The many documents that arrive in support of an admissions or financial aid application are just one example of high-volume, critical information living outside of SIS.

Not only does a SIS “silo” operate in a disconnected fashion from peripheral systems and sources, but it is also often short on automation. Along with barriers, we can add another troublesome b-word: bottlenecks.

Consider an actual silo – the kind used, for example, to house and dispense grain in bulk. Modern, sophisticated silos and silo systems have myriad automation capabilities: automated loading conveyors and feeders, automated climate sensors and alarms, automated measuring and dispensing mechanisms, and so forth. Consider the front-end process of getting the grain into the silo. Imagine the old days of doing this manually, shovelful by shovelful, versus today’s method of using elaborate conveying and chute systems to carry the product from truck trailers and train cars into massive hoppers.

Now, mentally convert those shovelfuls of grain into morsels of data entered into a SIS. Suppose those morsels are indexing values (i.e., metadata) for stored documents, as well as information appearing on the documents. Depending on the department and the degree to which it relies on manual keying to get this kind of data into SIS, shoveling may not be the most accurate analogy. Spoon-feeding may be closer to the reality.

Reflect for a moment on your institution’s heavily SIS-reliant departments (and on the IT support needs for those departments). If the spoon-feeding analogy resonates, then you have identified only the most basic symptom of a less than optimal use of SIS – and of people. It’s time to check for the rest.

Here, then, are Four SIS-Related Chores You Can Do Without. The first step in eliminating them is recognizing where and how often they are getting in the way.

Chore #1: Spoon-feeding SIS

Granted, some of the data being fed into SIS is likely already occurring in an efficient, automated manner. For instance, in your Admissions office, you may be receiving feeds from online application sources such as The Common Application or ApplyYourself (AY). In Financial Aid, you have information delivered by the federal government and input directly into SIS: data captured during the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) submission process or included on the Institutional Student Information Report (ISIR) or both. And, in Admissions and the Registrar’s Office, data may automatically pull in from testing services, electronic transcript sources or course equivalency databases such as CollegeSource.

Nevertheless, there is much more information coming in from other channels. The bulk of it is arriving on documents – emails, attachments and, especially, paper. Getting information both about and from those documents into SIS can be a much more cumbersome proposition. In the case of paper, the import of key information is a lot more cumbersome. In fact, the word *key* is relevant in another sense: without automated ways of capturing and importing data from documents originating in paper, staff will be literally manually keying in information – loads of information. Not only is this process excruciatingly time-consuming, it is also extremely error-prone, despite staff's most conscientious, diligent efforts.

So, if staff members are spending inordinate amounts of time punching data from documents into entry fields in SIS screens, look to add or expand capabilities for capturing documents and data electronically in order to ease (by automating) SIS data entry.

Chore #2: Chasing Paper

This maddeningly time-wasting chore is easy to spot. To confirm its bothersome presence, spend some time – probably less than an hour – in a SIS-reliant department where documents are processed and filed in significant volumes. Look around. Does it seem as though staff members are getting up from their desks and heading across the room or down the hall an awful lot? If so, you can probably safely conclude that most of these side trips are for reasons other than leg stretches and bathroom breaks.

More often, they reflect the need to fetch documents from a filing cabinet, box or pile. Watch for an additional sign of inefficiency – one that threatens student service. If a phone call sent the staff member on the hunt, it's likely the caller requested an update on the receipt or status of the particular document. That call – and the lack of information in SIS about the document – prompted what otherwise might appear to be yet another coffee run.

As noted for Chore #1, the first step to eliminating these slowdowns is leaning on automation to get information about and from documents into SIS. The next step is making those documents electronically available for retrieval directly from SIS screens. Give users the ability to pull up related documents or complete files with a quick click from SIS, and watch service delays disappear as staff now answers inquiries on a first call.

Chore #3: Playing the Match Game

Particularly burdensome in departments that process incoming applications (Admissions being the most prominent example), this chore, like number 2, also involves trips to the filing cabinet. However, identifying this pesky time-killer may require a deeper investigation into the specific nature of the document being searched. What is it in this case? Typically, it's an "orphan."

In an Admission Office, for example, an orphaned document is one that cannot be identified and associated with any other information on hand. Usually, this is because no SIS record yet exists for the prospective student. What happens when, say, a letter of recommendation from a high school teacher arrives in advance of the student's application? It gets filed away in a drawer crammed with other orphaned or "miscellaneous" documents, through which staffers have to painstakingly search in an often futile attempt to match the stray with other incoming documents.

To reduce the labor devoted to this redundant chore, you'll need to do more than simply convert paper documents into electronic format and get them into an electronic document filing system. You'll need sophisticated tools for automating the search-and-match process.

Chore #4: Dealing with Dual-App Toggle Mania

Even in SIS-reliant offices that are doing at least some electronic document capture and file storage, delays persist. Without integration between the document repository and SIS, staff members are forced into the electronic version of getting up and walking across the room.

Envision this common scenario: A student phones the Financial Aid Office to inquire about the receipt of a tax document. Because the office had alerted her that the initial 1040 they received from her parents was from the wrong tax year, she wants to double-check to make sure her parents followed up and sent the right return. When the student calls, a staff member logged into SIS pulls up the student record. Studying the SIS screen, he sees no evidence in the system's document tracking checklist that the correct, updated document has arrived. In order to confirm its receipt, the staff member has to log in separately to the electronic filing cabinet system and type in search parameters for this particular document.

Wouldn't it be much easier and much faster if the staff member could simply click on the SIS screen to bring back the inquiring student's complete aid file? Of course it would. And, wouldn't it be even more helpful if the checklist in SIS had been automatically updated when the newly submitted tax form was scanned, indexed and stored in image format? Again, yes. With a document tracking update occurring prior to the student's call, the staff member could even more quickly and just as confidently answer the student's question.

Put Chores to Rest

It's important to remind ourselves from time to time that work doesn't have to mean "chore." Yes, there are increasing volumes of work, fewer resources to handle them and added pressures for fast turnaround. Nevertheless, when armed with the right capabilities, staff should experience just the opposite – ease and speed rather than painstaking, exhausting labor. Once the office's mundane but necessary processing tasks are being completed easily and quickly, staff can devote more time to higher value activities such as monitoring targeted demographics in an applicant pool or giving more attention to customer service.

Frankly, the kinds of processing inefficiencies outlined above are most likely occurring in any department currently struggling to overcome disconnections between, on one hand, the screens and data in a line-of-business (LOB) application and, on the other, related documents. Those other applications (or modules within a larger application suite, such as an ERP system) could be a CRM or recruiting tool, a donor or alumni management system, a housing management system, a facilities management program, or any of the myriad applications deployed across the institution for a point-specific process or need.

To bridge the gaps between what will otherwise remain information silos, your institution will need to investigate capabilities that go well beyond what a basic electronic filing cabinet can provide. You will need something that can serve not only as a central, secure repository for the documents associated with any and all departments, but also as a LOB application integration platform and business process optimization engine. That something is a full-on enterprise content management (ECM) platform.

About the Author

Tom von Gunden's deep understanding of best practices in deploying Enterprise Content Management (ECM) capabilities in colleges and universities comes from his direct involvement in numerous successful implementations. Tom spent more than a dozen years in higher education, serving as a tenured university professor, program director and accreditation specialist. A long-time observer of the emergence of ECM as a business-critical platform, Tom also served for several years as chief editor of Web and print publications focused on ECM and related network storage technologies. Tom currently directs Hyland Software's market education and advisement initiatives for higher education.