

Princeton's Hanu Software

Offers Solution to N.J.'s Educational Database Challenges

BY ANIL SINGH

More than ever, New Jersey needs to make the most of its education dollars. In fact, a recent Star Ledger article articulated Rutgers University's need "for a centralized database for student information, accessible to any official, according to a report issued by the university senate."

With an old, antiquated system, Rutgers is in desperate need of a centralized database for student information. Not only does it force staffers to manually input updates, it also requires referencing paper lists. And, the various systems cannot communicate with each other.

Rutgers and New Jersey are not alone. New York and Michigan have also grappled with the cost in both dollars and staff hours to install software to fix the problem. In fact, according to the Star Ledger, installing the software took Michigan about 300,000 staff hours.

With an annual budget of about \$25 million, New York's Higher Education Opportunity Program (HEOP) provides financial and academic support to more than 5,000 students a year in 66 private institutions of higher learning in New York State. Several years back, the New York City region of Higher Education Opportunity Programs Professional Organization (HEOP-PO) through New York University (NYU) turned to Hanu Software. Working with HEOP-PO and NYU, Hanu designed ElRep (Eligibility and Reporting), tailored for the needs of state programs that provide extra support for financially and academically disadvantaged students in institutions of higher learning.

ElRep is a web-based, cost-effective, error proof, secure, time-saving and environmentally friendly system for administering such programs.

The implementation of ElRep has already resulted in dramatic benefits for schools throughout New York State. Built entirely from the ground up, utilizing the latest technologies, the user friendly, highly configurable ElRep system can immediately benefit New Jersey as well as all state and school systems nationwide. ElRep combines a sophisticated, extremely flexible rules engine capable of executing thousands of rules and a user-friendly web-based interface. The rules engine can accommodate the needs of any education assistance program system regardless of its size and complexity. The interface makes the system easy to implement, ensuring a high degree of accuracy with minimal staff training.

"The system for determining eligibility is practically fool-proof, and we've been able to reduce the amount of time spent on preparing reports by 80 percent," said Dr. Param Chawla, former executive director of Opportunity Programs at NYU. In addition to saving time preparing reports, ElRep

- Ensures financial assistance funds allocation only to qualified students;
- Saves hundreds of thousands of dollars a year in staff time;
- Supports green initiatives by eliminating the need for paper reports and paper processing; and
- Increases transparency and accountability between

institution and the State Education Department (SED) and other granting agencies.

The functions of ElRep can be broken into two categories: Eligibility and Reporting. Regardless of the state, eligibility assistance is available to students who meet a complex set of criteria including residency, academic records and household income. The criteria are set by the State Education Department and are subject to change every year. Additionally each institution can set its own academic requirements.

ElRep streamlines the process of identifying eligible students into four steps. First, a counselor enters the student's information using the Eligibility Wizard; easy-to-use forms and navigation accelerate tasks and safeguards against mistakes. Second, the Wizard provides preliminary eligibility status. Third, after the student is deemed pre-eligible, the counselor follows a checklist generated by the system to confirm the student has provided all of the required documentation. At the fourth and final step, the verification engine runs the student's information through a list of the state's rules to determine final eligibility. SED officials use the rules engine to update requirements each year, eliminating the need for counselors to manually keep track of the changes.

Reporting with ElRep, all related reports can be generated automatically and viewed online. In order to protect student privacy and sensitive information, ElRep provides user-specific access ensuring that people can view only information directly related to their role such as counselor, administration, director or SED/funding agency official.

If the State of New Jersey higher education system follows New York's lead, any of the more than 30 colleges and universities in the Garden State could use the ElRep system to:

- Aggregate and send information about eligible students to the funding agency.
- Submit funding requests to the funding agency.
- Submit budgeting plans to the funding agency.
- Aggregate and report on the academic outcomes of the eligible students for the state.
- Track progress of individual students.

The SED/funding agency can use the ElRep tool to:

- Review information submitted on line by institutions to ensure compliance.
- Communicate with institutions regarding funding.
- Track academic outcomes of selected students by institution.
- Generate reports for state legislators, educational agencies and business communities.

Outdated systems in the New Jersey colleges and universities is costing the state and the schools millions of dollars and with rising enrollments this will only grow larger. The office of financial aid in New Brunswick employs 35 people to handle grants and loans for 36,000 students. The increased efficiency and improved programs assessment that would be delivered by Hanu's ElRep, or other similar software, will be useful during the current difficult fiscal environments. ■

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