Business Applications Help University Serve Students Better and More Efficiently

Overview

Country or Region: United States
Industry: Higher education

Customer Profile
Liberty University (LU) is a Lynchburg, Virginia–based Christian evangelical university that delivers a rigorous academic program to more than 64,000 students.

Business Situation
Because of increasing enrollment that strained resources and impacted service levels, LU was looking for a system to better manage its work processes and customer relationships.

Solution
The University deployed Microsoft Dynamics CRM as a platform for building applications that support a wide range of business needs from call centers to student advocacy.

Benefits
- Rapid adoption
- Improved call center productivity
- Increased student retention

> "Microsoft Dynamics CRM captures every student interaction, from first contact through to enrollment and postenrollment. Workflow tools for productivity and collaboration help drive higher levels of efficiency."
>
> Matthew Zealand, Chief Information Officer, Liberty University

Liberty University (LU) is a Christian evangelical university that delivers a rigorous academic program to more than 64,000 students. The numerous business units and schools had created a patchwork of stand-alone applications, each hosting a small subset of student and fundraising data. With resources strained by rapidly increasing enrollment, the University deployed Microsoft Dynamics CRM as a platform for new business applications. The solution integrates with LU's existing enterprise resource planning system to facilitate central management of all student records and has enabled the central IT department to replace the numerous disparate applications and databases. In addition, business units across the University have embraced the solution. Call centers have reduced training time by more than 50 percent and increased productivity in making outbound calls by 17 percent.

Situation

Founded in 1971 by the late Dr. Jerry Falwell Sr., Liberty University (LU) is the largest and fastest-growing Christian evangelical university in the world. Its mission is to "Train Champions for Christ" by developing men and women with the values, knowledge, and skills essential to impact tomorrow's world. More than 12,000 students attend classes on its Lynchburg, Virginia, campus, and more than 50,000 students are enrolled in online courses. Education opportunities include 61 undergraduate programs, 41 graduate areas of study, and four doctoral programs for counseling, education, theology, and ministry. LU's mission is carried out for resident students through a rigorous academic program and structured social environment. External students receive a comparable academic program but without the structure of the residential community.

Aggressive Growth

For the past five years, LU has pursued an aggressive growth plan that increased online enrollment from 12,000 students to more than 50,000 students. Resident student enrollment increased by 30 percent during the years, online enrollment increased more than five-fold, and the number of credit hours increased by 600 percent.

A rapidly increasing student body created challenges for the University's many schools and administrative departments. It became increasingly difficult to keep up with the organizational and record-keeping burden and ensure a successful and enriching college experience for an increasing numbers of students without adding appreciably to staff or overhead.

Disparate Business Systems

The departments within LU operate as centralized business units, supported by a central IT department. The IT department also maintains the University's SunGard Banner enterprise resource planning (ERP) system, which runs on an Oracle database. Each department conducts its own operations using the SunGard Banner planning system. To view specific student information in the SunGard and Oracle system, many business units created custom, one-off applications to handle specific tasks, often relying on spreadsheets or stand-alone databases that staff created in Microsoft Access or MySQL to maintain information outside of the University's ERP system.

As the University grew, the inability to share data among these disparate systems and the difficulties of communicating among physically dispersed departments became apparent. Students enrolling or making changes to class schedules were passed from one department to the next rather than being served efficiently. Customer service agents found it difficult to navigate through an intimidating series of forms, each containing different student information, such as financial data, class schedule, or attendance records. Chris Hara, Director of IT Development at LU, states, "Critical pieces of student information were scattered across the entire University in silos that no one except the authors could access."

The proliferation of custom applications and tracking systems also created challenges for the IT department. Says Matthew Zealand, Chief Information Officer at LU, "Our resources were already spread thin. We were tasked with finding ways to support growth without having to increase the University's staff at the same rate as it added students."

LU required a business solution that would provide a complete view of student

information and a way to record calls, document interactions with students, and track fundraising activities. In addition, the University wanted to enable users from different departments to efficiently perform the tasks specific to their role.

Zealand envisioned a front-end application or applications that could supplement operations by leveraging the existing data store and enable LU's IT staff to easily tailor functionality to support its many constituents across the campus.

Solution

After exploring available options and architectures, LU engaged Microsoft Gold Certified Partner Planet Technologies to deploy Microsoft Dynamics CRM as a platform on which the University could deliver functionality to meet the unique needs of its various departments and business units.

Paul Reitmeyer, Senior CRM Consultant at Planet Technologies, explains, "We weren't trying to replace Banner with Microsoft Dynamics CRM; we were trying to augment the central system and replace the many disparate systems LU's IT department had outside of Banner. Our goal was to deploy a single solution that could integrate all those pieces, using Microsoft Dynamics CRM to provide an interface to Banner and give the users a single view of the student."

Deploying the Solution
Planet Technology along with Liberty's IT Development team deployed Microsoft Dynamics CRM by using a custom integration framework to sync and exchange data with the Oracle database that stores the University's student and ERP data. Staff view information in custom forms or in browser-based applications that use the business management solution to retrieve data from Banner. The solutions

use the security model of Microsoft Dynamics CRM to provide role-based security, exposing only the information that is appropriate to a particular person or process.

LU gradually rolled out the customer relationship management solution, addressing the needs of one department at a time and reusing core functionality with each new application. The first application targeted one of several residential call centers, where customer service agents relied on data from several sources to confirm students' general information and look up course schedules and financial records. The solution surfaces data from each of the respective systems in a single, browser-based form. Now, instead of having to navigate through a series of forms and switch between applications, agents can easily view all necessary information on a single page in a browser.

Providing a Familiar UI
The intuitive UI of Microsoft Dynamics CRM helps staff—often student volunteers or part-time help—get up-to-speed quickly and CRM has decreased training times by 50 percent; this is imperative in a position that sees high turnover. Zealand notes that most users are already experienced with Microsoft Outlook, so the solution feels familiar from the start. Training times for new users have decreased dramatically. "It just makes sense to put these users in an environment that is easier to learn," says Zealand.

Extending the Experience to Other Departments
After its initial success with the resident call center, the IT department developed custom applications for Student Advocacy and Student Service Centers. The new applications followed the same model, using Microsoft Dynamics CRM to expose

data from the central data store and to deliver highly specific functionality in a simple, streamlined user interface (UI).

For the Student Service Centers, which help students navigate the disparate departments of the institution, the ability to retrieve data from multiple sources means that a representative can often fulfill a student's request without passing the student from one department to the next. When a request does cross functional areas or departmental boundaries, the workflow functionality of Microsoft Dynamics CRM routes the forms automatically and ensures a timely response, enabling the rapidly growing institution to maintain the quality of service delivery.

Student Advocates help students with challenges ranging from academic issues to social adjustment concerns. Detailed notes, which are added to the student record, become available to other departments that might interact with that student as needed or as relevant. As a result, everyone who deals with a student is better informed about the history or unique needs of that student.

As word of the initial success has spread across campus, demand has grown for new applications built on Microsoft Dynamics CRM. Departments and workgroups—from recruiting and admissions to alumni and fundraising—have approached the IT department, requesting to migrate their applications to the solution.

"People routinely show up at our office with their data on a thumb drive, asking us to integrate their stand-alone data and applications with the University's system," says Hara. "People definitely see the value of storing the data they collect in a centrally managed repository. They're willing to make the information they collect available, as needed, to other departments because they see the benefit of having a 360-degree view of every student, donor, or other contact within an interface that is tailored to a particular task or mission."

The IT team's ability to reuse the core functionality of Microsoft Dynamics CRM in building new business applications helps it keep up with demand. For example, the IT team was able to customize a phone-call disposition list for the Donor Management Department's fundraising efforts by filtering the lists of donors and relevant activities. This reduces the time it takes to prepare monthly reports of activities, such as enrollments or donations, and makes the reports more accurate and complete. Zealand notes, "Our ability to reuse functionality and add customizations gave us quick wins with our business units."

Benefits

LU takes advantage of Microsoft Dynamics CRM to streamline dozens of aspects of its operations. The rapidly growing institution now has the ability to quickly and cost-effectively deploy business applications that support growth while improving the quality of service delivery, increasing efficiency, and serving its Christian-centered educational mission.

Rapid Adoption

After receiving positive feedback from multiple business units, LU has recognized widespread improvements and efficiency gains in student, alumni, and donor experiences. "Demand for Microsoft Dynamics CRM spread like wildfire once our staff saw that they could pinpoint information they care about," explains Zealand.

Zealand also notes that users quickly become proficient in the new applications. Training time for new call center agents has

been reduced by more than half—from 17 days on the old system to 7 days or less. "Because our staff is familiar with the solution's interface, which works like other Microsoft productivity software, we need less training time," he adds. "In addition, the programs are more popular with the users."

Improved Call Center Productivity
LU has seen a 17 percent improvement in the call center staff's ability to handle outbound calls. By using efficiencies gained through automation and streamlined access to real-time information, the University receives increased productivity from existing resources. "Enhancing the productivity of our call centers translates into significant annual savings," says Zealand. "Simplified navigation and familiarity with Microsoft products have greatly improved efficiency with all of our departments."

Increased Student Retention
Perhaps most important to its mission, LU has noted a 0.8 percent increase in student retention since deploying Microsoft Dynamics CRM. With custom tools tailored to the Student Advocacy office, University leadership believes that the solution can help the staff reach out to more at-risk students.

"The goal now is to continually find new ways to increase those percentages," says Zealand. "Microsoft Dynamics CRM contributes to our financial health and, more importantly, it enables us to help students know and value themselves as they learn."

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Chris Hara, Director of IT Development,
Liberty University

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Microsoft Dynamics

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For more information about Microsoft Dynamics, go to:
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Liberty University

Founded in 1971 and located in Lynchburg, Virginia, on a 6,500-acre campus, Liberty University has grown during the past five years from a Christian college with a total of 19,000 students, on campus and online, to a formidable Christian University that today educates a combined total of 64,000 residential and distance education students. Education opportunities include 61 undergraduate programs, 41 graduate areas of study, and four doctoral programs. Liberty is ranked as one of the world's largest online educators.

For more information about Liberty University, please visit:
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