

Break With Tradition

Office of Business and Finance at State University of New York at Cobleskill

By Thomas W. Durso
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There was just one problem with State University of New York at Cobleskill's otherwise successful plan to boost revenue by focusing on noncredit-bearing professional education programs and community-based programming.

That was finding a better way to get students signed up for classes, yet one that was cost-neutral so as not to wipe out the revenue gains.

Crunched by state budget cuts, SUNY Cobleskill had effectively counterpunched by leveraging its nontraditional academic offerings. But with the increased popularity of those programs came much more work, including more processing of registrations and handling of cash, and developing new marketing materials and distribution avenues.

While traditional students were able to register and pay for classes online, noncredit course takers had no such access. Tasking the college's IT department with creating and managing a new system simply was not possible given fiscal constraints.



Now that all students can register and pay for classes online, business and finance staff have more time for other crucial tasks.

Fortunately, an external solution, discovered after hours of online research, proved extremely beneficial, customer-friendly, and cost-effective.

Administrative Software Applications (ASAP), Inc.'s program is an integrated, web-based registration and management software system that provides a secure payment cards industry-compliant site for online registration and credit card processing, as well as numerous administrative and marketing features.

New registration software gave nontraditional students much greater access to course offerings and administrators a lot more tools for their kit.

Nontraditional students now can sign up as easily as their more traditional counterparts. Online registration and payment can be done 24/7; no longer are students limited to printing out and mailing a form or calling during business hours to provide a credit card number. In the first three months of operation, more than 100 students registered and paid, freeing staff for other tasks.

"Since we implemented the program in January, at least half of all our registrations have occurred after hours," says Louise Biron, Cobleskill's controller. "We know we're definitely filling a need in the community for improved access to our registration."

The new system's marketing features have also proved unexpectedly helpful. Enhanced email options have reduced printing and mailing costs, and an online catalog, easily customizable and updated, gives prospective students real-time, easily

accessed information about offerings. Biron predicts the online version will replace the print catalog entirely in time.

Things have gone so well, in fact, that Biron and her colleagues are exploring other areas where ASAP could be used. They're having discussions about analyzing registration patterns to target marketing offers.

Typically, Biron observes, traditional-aged students push their institutions to advance technologically, but it can be difficult for such innovation to cross over into the nontraditional student world.

"Sometimes those two disciplines never really combine or interact," she says. "But we have a president and administration that see a lot of collaboration with what you can do with professional and community education and what you can do on the academic side of the house."

From improved customer service to cost savings, from more effective marketing to increased data mining, ASAP has been not just a handy tool but a true game changer, Biron notes.

"It's had a significant impact on the way we do business," she says.