

Degree Audit Systems

Are they worth it?



by Virginia Johns

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There have been presentations at the conferences and discussions on our electronic lists about campus projects to implement the various Degree Audit products available on the market. We have heard about the functionality that they each provide, the technical platforms upon which they operate, their requirements for interfacing with the local SIS, the ease of use, and the level of effort required to implement and operate.

At a PACRAO Emerging Managers' Institute, after an energetic discussion about the complexities of such an implementation and the length of time that these projects seem to take, one of the attendees posed a seemingly simple question – “Are they worth it?”.

Over the next year I posed this question to various electronic lists used by Registrar professionals. I received many requests for the results of the survey (“keep us posted, we are currently involved in implementation and are asking ourselves this very question”), about a dozen responses from those that had recently implemented (“too early to tell”), and 25 substantive responses which I summarize below. These 25 responses were from a range of institution types (community college, research university, public, private) and sizes (1500 students to 58,000 students). Twelve reported a student FTE count of 10,000 or more.

The survey included 5 open ended questions eliciting information about:

1. Results
2. Measures
3. Worth
4. Environment
5. Advice.

For those of you who can't stand suspense – the unanimous opinion was YES, they are worth it.

Results: Value Provided

Common criteria used to judge success of a system implementation include completing the project on time and within budget. Indicators that more closely address the value aspect include:

- Is it being used?
- Has it enabled efficiencies?
- Has it improved service?

All respondents reported that the system was being used on their campus. Usage appears heavier on those campuses that provide student self-service audits and a “what-if” capability via the web. Steady or increasing usage is the norm; no one reported that usage dropped off, e.g., after an initial novelty period. One campus described it as “being used rabidly”.

Respondents consistently noted efficiencies. They commented on how it streamlined advisement, making it more efficient and effective. It improved a tedious manual process. It catches items that are sometimes missed in a manual process and enables advisors to answer “what-if” questions more practically and definitively. By providing access to audits for all students online, students are not restricted to seeing one advisor (a practical concern in the paper process for some). Advising backlogs are minimized through use of student self-audits for basic progress information. Decreases were noted in phone call and email traffic. Advising time is devoted less to bookkeeping and more to advising about options. Significant decreases were realized in the time required to provide final degree certifications. It has allowed campuses to maintain and in some cases improve their level of service despite staff reductions in tough budget times. It saves reams of paper.

Improved service for students was a common result, especially on those campuses that provided the web self-service component. It allows for the 24/7 type service that today’s students expect. It enables students to routinely and closely monitor their own academic progress. Students are provided consistent, accurate information. It has cut down on the “surprise” factor on graduation audits, relieving stress for students. It enables more proactive advising – identifying students in academic difficulty, off-track, or taking excess units beyond those required for the degree. It is a valuable tool for students as they register for their next term.

Measures

The survey asked for quantitative and qualitative measures of the reported value.

No one reported cost savings; several pointedly warned not to expect such savings. While you may save on paper, postage, and similar costs associated with paper processes, you need to invest in technology to provide this improved service. Labor savings (opportunity costs) were mentioned by many. Staff time is reallocated to more

“productive”, “higher-level” work. Other quantitative measures observed by some campuses were improved graduation rates, improved freshmen retention, decrease in the number of “excess” units, and more timely course offerings.

Improved service and increased job satisfaction were the primary qualitative measures reported. Increase in accuracy, timeliness of information, and ready access to information contribute to the improved service. One campus provided a vivid example: “The number of students told that they did not graduate, AFTER leaving campus is lower. This has gone from a serious problem to a non-issue.” Enabling students to come better prepared to advising sessions with lower levels of anxiety and decreasing manual processes contributed to the increased feeling of job satisfaction.

Worth: Value vs. Investments

This question elicited the most forceful responses. They don’t understand how they could have lived without it. However, these exclamations were prefaced with warnings about how complicated it is, how much care must be exercised, how long it will take.

Besides the values noted above which were expected outcomes, campuses reported that the process of developing the system provided secondary values. It uncovered mechanisms that tend to slow down the process and reduce clarity for the students (e.g., extensive course substitutions not included in the published degree requirements). It forced a clearer presentation and interpretation of policies and helped to better educate both advisors and students about degree policies. It identified complex policies where inconsistent advising had been practiced in the past (e.g., academic residency and minimum gpa). It raised awareness of the amount of change that occurs each year with degree programs. The program/curriculum development process improved as a result of this increased awareness.

Environment: Hindrances, Facilitators

The survey asked for factors in the campus environment that either hindered or contributed to the attainment of value.

Level of authority and control was noted as a significant factor. Campuses with decentralized control, such as autonomous colleges with differing sets of requirements and dispersed responsibility for academic progress evaluations and degree certifications, reported that their success depended on significant collaboration among the various authority groups. This was a hindrance of sort, as it resulted in longer timelines. However, these same campuses commented that good relations at the start were enhanced and improved during the process. Campuses where the responsibility for advising and degree certification were housed in a single area (generally smaller campuses) reported that their scope of control was a facilitator.

Adequate human resource levels was emphasized by most, both technical labor with appropriate skills, as well as advisor and admissions/registrar staff labor for requirements specification and testing. If you have them, it's great; if you don't, keep asking.

Unwritten requirements discovered during the process slowed down many a project, however, as noted above, most considered this a side benefit as well.

The volume of exceptions/petitions was noted as a hindrance. Respondents stressed the importance of a two-prong approach: 1) provide a mechanism for incorporating these into the audit (as it is imperative to provide the complete picture to gain the desired value) and 2) review petitions for recurring patterns and strongly advocate to incorporate these into the standard approved requirements.

Advice

Respondents offered some words of wisdom to those of us still striving to achieve the value.

- Ensure that users review and document requirements for a degree before handing it over to the programmers. Give them time to uncover the hidden requirements, sort out inconsistent interpretations, examine exception patterns, and resolve these matters with revisions to degree programs and academic policies.
- Establish/maintain a good working relationship among academic departments, colleges, Admissions, and Registrar.
- Either start with a small major or receptive department and program for them extensively, or start programming for everyone, but program broadly (total credits and gpa, then add in GE requirements, then add major requirements, then add electives).
- Lobby for adequate human resources.
- Get support from higher levels of campus administration.
- Recognize that it is going to take time – it is complex.
- Remember that others have gone before you and found that ***It is worth it!***

The author wishes to thank the respondents from regist-1 as well as the Pacrao and AAU electronic lists. Undoubtedly they will each recognize their contributions in the above summary.

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