Incorporating Non-credit Curriculum into Student Information System

By
Tom Watts

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Abstract: Oregon State University has held discussions over the past several years between enrollment services, central computing and finance support offices, and departments on campus that offer non-credit course work, about the possibility of incorporating non-credit related records into the same information system that houses regular credit. Last year, OSU successfully incorporated the first instance of non-credit work into the OSU Banner information system. Shortly, we will begin detailed discussions with a second group that offers non-credit course work. Our success with the first group, the Extended Campus K12 program was not surprising, but it did involve tackling new problems and collaborating on solutions that made the non-credit record processing accurate, efficient, useful and manageable. The second group that we will work with is the English Language Institute, and our goal is to duplicate the success of the ECampus K12 program. This article describes what we encountered, how we managed the implementation process, and some of the significant issues in working with non-credit records.

Introduction

Non-credit courses at OSU have existed in several departments for many years. Some departmental workshops and seminars have been offered as non-credit sessions, and some of the workshops as part of the university's distance education program are non-credit or have non-credit counterparts to the credit sessions. In addition, the Office of International Education's English Language Institute (ELI) offers non-credit language courses for students who come to the university specifically for intensive English language programs (typically in summer or short-term programs), or to international students who need to improve their English skills prior to acceptance to OSU programs (typically graduate programs).

The record-keeping for those courses has been done in the past with information systems maintained by the departments. From time-to-time in the past, there have been conversations about the use of the university student information system (Banner) to record that information, but until the last two years, the discussions have been very informal and none of the non-credit coursework has been incorporated into the Banner system. That changed two years ago with the request from the OSU Extended Campus (ECampus) division to have the K12 program data managed in the Banner system. The K12 program required a detailed records system that ECampus could rely on to build schedules, complete registrations and billing, and to forward course results to participating K12 school districts. That level of record keeping was beyond a departmental data base, and the ECampus request was for Registrar's Office assistance, together with the other necessary offices, to provide records for the K12 non-credit program.

The implementation was begun with information sessions that detailed the purposes and requirements of the K12 program, and from there the support offices defined how the OSU student information system and finance system (Banner) would be used to incorporate the data, and how the various processes necessary to the project would be handled**. *The ultimate success of the projec***t, both in terms of meeting the implementation deadline and in effectively creating the non-credit system, was based on ***identifying the implementation team**, **defining the requirements**, **assigning tasks and deadline dates***, and ***effectively melding the work on several fronts into the final system product***.

From Planning to Implementation

The most daunting aspect of the K12 non-credit project was that this was our first foray into the arena of non-credit coursework and records in Banner. The unknown aspect – from how to create a system to record non-credit information within Banner, to what exactly would be included in the non-credit records – was as puzzling as it was challenging. The elements of the implementation plan that made the project ultimately successful included: identifying and including the players in the implementation, defining the scope of the project, and creating a schedule as quickly as possible for the tasks that needed to be completed for the first term of implementation.

Identifying the Implementation Team

The group that would become the implementation team was initially called together by the OSU Registrar, who was the first and primary contact for the K12 program staff. The Registrar called together a group that she knew would be required to develop the system for the K12 non-credit information in Banner. That implementation team would require the appropriate representatives from the ECampus K12 program, and would also require representatives from the appropriate support offices.

The implementation team was established very quickly in the process, and included:

- ECampus K12 program (Director of K12)

- ECampus Student Services (Outreach Director, Director of Business Services, IT Systems Analyst)
- Enrollment Services (Registrar, Assistant Registrar, Registrar IT Manager, Admissions IT Manager, and Admissions Associate Director of Operations)
- OSU Business Affairs Office (Student Accounts Manager)
- OSU Central Computing (Manager of Administrative Computing, and Programmer/Analyst)

The Registrar and the ECampus Outreach Director became the co-chairs of the implementation team. The Registrar managed the support groups represented on the team, i.e., enrollment services, Business Affairs, and Central Computing. The ECampus Director managed the ECampus groups. The implementation team quickly became an excellent working group. The team gelled very nicely over the course of the implementation, making the planning meetings and information exchanges very useful and productive.

As the implementation progressed, the implementation team expanded to include smaller working groups within each area (Registrar's, Admissions, K12, and finance staffs), and the work of those groups was summarized and explained to the larger group at each meeting. These groups generally worked on the specific processes within each department, identifying how those processes would work and what further analysis needed to be done by the larger group.

The excellent working relationship of the implementation team became one of the most prominent successes of the project, and recognized as such by all players on the implementation team.

Implementation Meetings

The first step of the implementation planning was an organizational and informational meeting that provided:

1. an overview of the K12 program,
2. an explanation of the courses and services that the ECampus K12 program would be offered to students,
3. a general discussion of the enrollment services that ECampus would require from Admissions and Registrar's offices, and
4. a discussion of the fee assessment and collection issues.

The first meeting also allowed all players in the implementation to ask questions and submit ideas about the range of topics that we would need to address in the implementation. The first meeting provided context and a great deal of useful information; however, ***the most beneficial outcome of the first meeting was the consensus that regular, agenda-driven meetings would be required throughout the process.***

From that first meeting, the full implementation group met on a regular basis, with intervals no longer than a month between meetings. Each meeting was organized around an agenda, which then became the framework for keeping track of tasks and completion dates. The minutes of each meeting were kept in sufficient detail to serve as a history of what was done and record the agreements that were made on timelines, coding, deadlines, and other decisions. Reference to the minutes was consistent throughout the planning stage.

As the meetings progressed, the agendas became more specific, and the focus and progress of each meeting better defined. The full implementation team met about once each month, and after the first several meetings, smaller work groups were established and their work was reported in the full meetings on tasks completed, issues resolved, and items that surfaced that needed the full implementation team's attention.

The meetings were excellent opportunities to exchange information and for each office or department within the full implementation team to see the issues from each other's perspective. For example, the opportunity to understand why certain processes were needed, why information had to be created in a certain format, how and on what schedule the courses would be offered to the K12 students, and how the nuts and bolts of the scheduling, grading, and billing would work gave everyone a full appreciation for the complexity of the project.

Task Schedules and Deadlines

One of the interesting balances that had to be struck in this project was how to define the project parameters and enhance the final product, while at the same time meeting the project go-live date of Fall 2003. It was tempting to refine and to try to perfect the system from the outset; however, the project was also on a fast track, and the tasks necessary for the admission, course scheduling, registration and fee assessment for the first semester had to be completed.

One of the most important methods to meet the implementation timeline was to establish critical tasks and deadlines for completion. The first discussions for the project began in February 2003, and the start date was set for the Fall 2003 semester, beginning in early September 2003. Deadlines were established for:

- Banner coding guidelines,
- Admission web site processes,
- course scheduling,
- tuition and fee rates,
- fee assessment and billing processes,
- other related tasks.

Those related tasks included K12 processes for information release to parents, school district communications, defining data warehouse information requirements and access, among others.

The various tasks presented the usual challenges, such as issues that arose that required testing, and additional requirements that surfaced that had to be included. In addition, all the staff members working on the implementation had other responsibilities, so time constraints and schedules were a formidable issue. There was a lot of cooperation and collaboration in the completion of most of the tasks, and all the necessary tasks were completed in time to meet all deadlines. After the implementation deadline, there was continued work on enhancements and adjustments to the system that made processes, reports, and communication more effective; however, the implementation team put its energy into meeting the deadlines for the tasks that we defined as central to the initial implementation.

Issues Important to the Implementation of Non-Credit

One of the reasons that the K12 non-credit project was interesting was that it presented a variety of issues that the implementation team had to resolve before the system could be implemented. There were issues related to the courses and services that the K12 program wanted to offer students, and related issues that the support offices had to resolve in order to make the non-credit information useable in Banner. Both groups worked to resolve the issues and there were many instances of compromise in how processes would work, such as the timing of processes, how data would be entered, and other issues. It was important in meeting the challenges that the full group concur on the solution, and in every instance that occurred.

Some of the more pressing and interesting issues included:

- how to effectively segregate the non-degree data in Banner,
- how to structure the admit process and what level of assistance to allow school districts to have in the admit process,
- how to accommodate third-party billing and the timing for fee assessment,
- how to adapt processes for registration, registration changes, grading, and transcript request
- how to accommodate the requests from parents to have access to information

Effectively Segregating Non-Credit Data

The first major challenge was developing a way to segregate non-credit information from the other data on Banner. Our task was to devise a coding scheme to ensure that terms, courses, grade modes, student level, and instructors were all associated with the K12 non-credit program.

The coding scheme was designed so that where appropriate, the coding could be used for other programs that we added to the non-credit portion of Banner. For instance, College and Student Level were coded as NC, for non-credit, and if other non-credit programs are added, those codes will be used for those programs as well.

For information that is K12-related, the codes identify the K12 program specifically. For instance, Student Type and Term codes identify the K12 non-credit program. When the records for other non-credit programs are implemented into Banner, we will want to keep the data for the various non-credit programs segregated from each other, and the non-credit data segregated from credit information. Our coding guidelines for non-credit information were designed specifically with those levels of separation in mind.

Structuring the Admit Process

The Office of Admissions worked closely with the K12 program staff to identify an admit process that allowed students to apply for non-credit programs themselves, and that was accessible to school districts if they wanted to assist students or admit students en masse for the program.

The admit process is web-based, and allows for Office of Admission intervention, if necessary. Because some school districts were interested in the K12 program for specific groups of students, or for students who would take specific classes (language of mathematics, for example), the school districts were interested in admitting groups of students at one time. The Admissions staff and K12 program designed the admit process so that with the appropriate notification and access approval from K12, school district administrative staff can assist students with the admit process, and the process can also accommodate school districts who want to absorb the cost of the admit fee rather than have the student pay the fee.

The flexibility in the admission processing is a very great benefit to the K12 students, the school districts, and the OSU K12 program.

Fee Assessment and Accommodating 3rd Party Billing

Fee assessment and third-party billing were very important considerations in the implementation. For fee assessment, the Business Affairs Office (BAO) worked with the accounts staff from Extended Campus and with the K12 staff to determine the best timing for assessments, how to accurately assess tuition plus fees for the courses, and, perhaps most importantly, how to handle the processing for the school districts who wanted to pay as third-parties for the costs of the classes.

Because the K12 courses are set up on 18-week semesters, rather than the OSU 10-week terms, the assessments follow a different schedule. The timing also factored in drop periods, when students could drop classes with varying levels of tuition reimbursement.

Central Computing also helped BAO and K12 staff with the mechanics of the billing processes, ensuring that the changes to the usual OSU fee assessment and billing cycles would work effectively for BAO and the ECampus K12 staff members, and that the process to handle the third-party billing worked well for OSU and the school districts involved.

Fee assessment required a great deal of coordination between all the offices working on the implementation, and was one of the more complicated issues; however, it was resolved before the deadline date. There have been several adjustments to the process and the timing that have the fee handling more efficient, but the process for fee assessment that was in place for the initial implementation was a very good process.

Processes for Registration, Grading and Transcript Requests

Some of the central concerns for the program were the creation of a schedule, the process for student registration, course grading and grade distribution, and processing the requests for transcripts.

These issues were dealt with in large part through a small working group from the Registrar's Office. The Registrar, Assistant Registrar, IT Manager, Records Manager, and Special Programs Manager all worked on the issues, with excellent support from central computing staff. The intent was to use technology as much as possible, and to use the processes for credit programs as the template for corresponding processes for the non-credit program.

This registration and records processes relied greatly on the effectiveness of the coding guidelines, and the working group worked smoothly through the issues on the different timetable for activities (18 week-semester versus 10-week term), and addressed the possibility that the younger student population might be less adept or comfortable with the web-based processes for registration and records request. Creation of the courses in Banner catalog, and creation of the sections for the specific terms were coordinated with the K12 staff.

The design of the transcript for non-credit coursework required a lot of work form the working group, and the transcript issues were dealt with by the Assistant Registrar and Records Manager, and the Registrar's IT Manager. ***Display fields, online request processes, legends*** for the information were all issues that the working group resolved. The transcripts are tailored specifically for the non-credit programs, and can be used by other programs whose records are incorporated into Banner.

As ECampus K12 completes its second year using Banner, the registration processes, grading cycles, and transcript requests procedures are all working extremely well.

Parents Requests for Information

This topic surfaced early as the age of the students and the greater involvement of the parents made record access a key issue. The OSU policy is to restrict access to academic records to the students, and there are virtually no exceptions to that policy. BAO has procedures in place that allow parents to access fee and payment information, if parents and students request that access.

K12 staff knew the interest that parents would have in their children's registration, grades, and fees. In order to ensure that information was available and confidentiality and appropriate disclosure was ensured, the implementation group agreed on two steps that would help with parental permission for the student to enroll and parental request for information.

- **Parental permission for students to enroll**. ECampus and K12 staff follow-up with parents after a student is admitted as a non-credit student so that parents understand what the student has done and what the expectations are.

- **Parental requests for information.** On the web admission application, there is a check box that the student can use to indicate that his or her parents have permission to request information related to K12 registration and records.

The permission for parents to obtain information is stored in Banner, and before requests are answered the core offices check that field to make sure that the parents have been granted access to information.

K12 program and the core offices (Admissions, Registrar's, and Business Affairs) have created procedures that accommodate parents' requests for information about their students' progress in the K12 program.

Replicating the Success of the K12 Project

This project required an innovative and creative approach to the use of the Banner system and the processes that support the K12 program. All members of the team understood that the project would require some unique processing, and that the success would depend on collaboration and cooperation between the various offices involved. That is exactly what happened, with excellent information exchange, creative use of the Banner functionality, and effective processes for resolving issues.

The project has been a success from its initial implementation to the adjustments that have been made to fine tune the process and procedures. The successful work on the K12 program also has made it a very useful template for the non-credit projects that will follow.

About the Author: Tom Watts is an Assistant Registrar at Oregon State University. He has worked at OSU since March 2001, and this is Tom's third year as a member of the PACRAO Writer's Team. Email address: tom.watts@oregonstate.edu