

Building the Digital Foundation for Student Success

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A recent surge in the number of students applying to colleges and universities is creating heavy administrative burden and increasing competition to attract top applicants. The National Center for Education found that enrollment at academic institutions has grown from 25% in 1970 to 40% in 2014 for adults between the ages of 18 and 24. Even this year, universities across the country like UCLA, Princeton, and Williams College in Massachusetts reported up to a 25% increase in applications. This increase is leading many institutions to modernize their digital infrastructure – converting from a decades-old paper system that has become inefficient in the modern age to streamlining communication between students, faculty, and staff electronically. Laserfiche is leading this change and institutions are seeing transformative results.

Process reengineering makes a big impact at the University of Mary Washington

A big room lined with filing cabinets holding the information of each student applicant is finally a relic of the past at the University of Mary Washington. In 2016, the school underwent a digital transformation by switching to a paperless system in which students use a portal to upload their application and check its status. School administrators implemented [Laserfiche enterprise content management \(ECM\)](#) software to tackle the enormous task of converting thousands and thousands of paper files into an online system that not only served the needs of students but also staff. “The phone used to ring constantly with students asking about the status of their application; it was an extremely inefficient use of staff time to search a file for a missing document,” says Kimberley Buster-Williams, vice president for enrollment management at the University of Mary Washington, which is located in Fredericksburg, Va. “Now we just direct a student to their portal.” But the process from paper to paperless took a year of strategic planning – a process that Buster-Williams says was worth every minute of their time.

In a digital age, the behind-the-scenes application

process that took place at the University of Mary

Washington might sound archaic. Applications would only be sent electronically for staff to download and print before placing into a manila folder inside a wall of filing cabinets. When students sent in a transcript or additional document, student workers and staff would go in search of that folder to file it. “It was very time-consuming,” says Buster-Williams. “Things would come in so quickly that we couldn’t have a sense of where things were because they had to go through different stations. I quickly realized this had to end.”

Fortunately, the school was already a client of Laserfiche, which was being used to securely manage student records at the registrar’s office. But staff inside the enrollment office resisted the change. They were concerned that the system might crash, causing student files to be lost. They were also worried that the culture change would impact jobs. Those questions were quickly put to rest once the paperless filing system was up and running. It not only made staff more efficient with their time, it made the customer service to incoming students seamless by allowing applicants to easily and quickly check the status of any document related to their application.

Responsive, transparent services for prospective students

It took a year of strategic planning to take thousands of documents and create a digital filing cabinet, starting with the undergraduate students in the fall and finishing with the graduate students in the spring. “Laserfiche learned how our process worked with the paper files, and they were able to translate that into their online version,” says Buster-Williams. Working collaboratively with the school’s IT staff, a representative from Laserfiche provided one-on-one support in the conversion process. The new paperless system allowed incoming documents to automatically be classified and organized for faster retrieval. That in turn improved productivity, increasing the operational efficiency of staff, and enhancing customer service to prospective students. “Students used to call asking why we were requesting a transcript when they had sent one the other week,” says Buster-Williams. “We now are able to use the document imaging to capture in close to real time what has been received and direct students to the portal to see what is missing.”

Since going paperless, phone calls have dropped by nearly 50% and when they do come in, staff can easily and quickly pull up a student’s digital file. The digital transformation allows for more flexibility for recruiters who can review student applications through the secure server even on snow days when school is closed. The department not only maintained its staffing level, it made better use of staff time. Student workers who used to spend hours tediously filing papers are now being used as a recruiting tool, making personal phone calls to prospective students instead. The digitization of admissions operations allows Buster-Williams and her team to provide faster and more responsive services to prospective students, supporting the institution’s overall growth initiative. In fact, the new application processing time has also been reduced from one month to just a few days.

A paperless success story a decade in the making

On the other side of campus, advancement offices are also looking for more efficient ways to manage and track donor activity as well as leverage donor information in an effort to increase contributions. Mercyhurst University in Erie, P.A., went paperless using Laserfiche in 2007 and has seen the efficiency of their Advancement Department, which handles fund raising and alumni relations, soar. With 7,000 individual donations a year and 30,000 donor records that include copies of checks, tax receipts and correspondent emails, the three-inch-thick files for some donors made finding documents nearly impossible. And if something was misfiled, it was like



looking for a needle in a haystack. “After hiring Laserfiche, you never have a lost file ever again, or a folder sitting on someone’s desk and you can’t find it,” says Jeanette Britt, Mercyhurst’s vice president for technology and chief information officer.

While Britt says it was a daunting undertaking going paperless, success came in the pre-planning stage of taking a full year to look at their process and what they were storing. They had to ask themselves if they really needed to keep certain information, what it was going to be used for, and how many people needed access to it. In the end, Mercyhurst worked with Laserfiche to design a solution that fit the needs of the office by digitally organizing where each document needed to be stored. Instead of student workers printing and scanning documents, the information is now routed directly into the document repository. Staff can search by a donor name to find connections between donors to solicit more contributions. The online fund-raising system also generates a tax receipt that gets imported directly into Laserfiche. The digital transformation enables the advancement staff to be more efficient with their time by being able to access this information anytime from anywhere, even while traveling. As an added bonus, the department has been able to reclaim valuable real estate: the room that once held tens of thousands of documents is now an office for a new employee.

Thanks to its success at streamlining the process of eliminating paper documents in the Advancement Department at Mercyhurst, Laserfiche is now used within six departments at the university and by the end of the year will expand into academic support and human resources.

Transform into institutions of the future

Laserfiche is a leading global provider of enterprise content management software empowering colleges and universities to transform operations, improve efficiency and collaboration, and provide quality student and faculty services. Our series on this digital transformation will continue by taking an in-depth look at how modernization improves accountability and streamlines the workflow across departments for students, faculty, and staff.

[Learn more](#) about how Laserfiche’s industry-leading solution can enable your institution’s digital transformation.