YET ANOTHER DATABASE

Many schools consider the issue of multiple databases used by different departments (containing similar name and address data) to be a major roadblock in containing costs, improving services, ensuring accuracy and reducing administrative effort. But, here is a view from a different perspective:

Most institutions have expanded their use of computers and databases for administrative and academic uses over the past two decades. These databases now include:

- Admissions (prospect management)
- Student Affairs (attendance, grades and reports, parent-teacher interviews, permission management, printed and e-communications, achievement management, college and university application management)
- Financial (student accounts, invoicing and receivables)
- Development /Advancement (fund raising with current parents, past parents, alumni and friends, printed and e-communications, event management)

Names and addresses are the life-blood of all of these activities, and there is a definite "lifecycle" (imagine a student having their name and address entered once when they first inquire about attending, and that data seamlessly flowing through their years as a student and eventually as an alumnus – wouldn't that be great!) This integration is a sought after objective.

- The reality is somewhat different. Unlike most retail and manufacturing operations where products and services have life spans measured in a couple of years, if not months or even days, the association of a person with their school is literally measured as a life-time – as long as 70 to 80 years. And during that time the changes in information technology dictate that the databases and systems will change numerous times.

- Schools with "integrated" databases obtain some of the benefits described above, but also risk significant downtime if the single system is down for maintenance or upgrades. If all areas of the school rely on an integrated database, then all areas of the school will experience downtime at the same time. And upgrades will require that staff training happen at the same time – there is little flexibility to do selective or rolling upgrades. The usual alternative is to do the maintenance and upgrades during summer holidays – never optimal for most schools who crave some respite from the busy school year.

- Integrated databases do not allow schools to use "best of class" software. It is next to impossible for a single vendor to keep on top of all aspects of what is required within each functional area. Some of the integrated systems are strong in alumni and donor management, some in admissions, others in academic administration – but none are top notch in all areas. Thus, many schools suffer with systems that are great in one area, but are only marginal in others. But with the sizable investment and training completed, they are not able to switch to something that is less expensive and does indeed meet the needs of their particular area. The saying "a convoy moves at the pace of the slowest ship" may be an apt description of what many schools are experiencing with their integrated systems.

- Integrated systems also suffer from conflicting requirements. An admissions department only needs the name and address information for specific and limited purposes. They know what it takes to get their job done. The same with Advancement. But if a family with multiple children already has a record in the integrated database, who "owns" the information, and who is responsible for its upkeep.

With changing (and multiple) e-mail addresses, phone numbers, separated, divorced and recombined families at transient addresses it is very hard to create an integrated system that meets the needs of all aspects of a person or family's relationship at various (and overlapping) stages with the school.

- Students, Parents and Alumni interact directly with many of these systems on a regular basis. Because the integrated systems are generally designed from the viewpoint of the school (e.g. how to make life easier for clerical staff, administrators, teachers) they do not necessarily provide the easiest and clearest functionality for casual users.

  For example, many schools have secure on-line donation forms. The web forms usually match the requirements of the school's database format, rather than a more thoughtful form that only requires the minimum info required to make a donation. Similarly, an on-line community should be designed to make it easy for alumni to find and communicate with their peers, and for the school to communicate with alumni, rather than attempting to streamline the process of collecting data from alumni and automatically updating a database. Vendors who specialize in niches seem to be much more nimble at meeting the needs of both the school and their "stakeholders".

In summary, while integrated, cross-departmental systems are a noble objective, they require significant investment, training and support. They are not as flexible, capable, nor as "replaceable" as segmented niche systems. Many of these smaller niche systems have strong data upload and download features to assist in moving data to and from other systems.

Derek Fisher, President

Net Directories Inc.

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For further information please contact Dale Carter at:

dcarter@netdirectories.com, or toll-free at 1-877-833-7178