

Like Clockwork:

Dynamic Campus Streamlines University of Mary's IPEDS Response



Dynamic Campus

Reduced 600+ hour process to less than 250 annually.

Before electricity and quartz crystals, clocks had a variety of moving parts that had to work together for the device to function properly—a concept that resonates with higher education, especially when collecting data for the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). Three times a year, institutions are required to submit a broad range of information to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES); the survey has 13 different components covering everything from financial and academic information to graduation rates and retention.

When it comes to IPEDS, the moving parts include IT as well as the keyholder, HR, the business office, registrar's office and the financial aid office. Institutions draw from several information systems, including the ERP and auxiliary software, but in many cases, required information is also stored on Excel spreadsheets. Then there's data verification, which often identifies holes in the data that require input from subject matter experts.

For many institutions, the process is cumbersome. "It needs to be done in a very strictly formatted way, and the amount of time it takes to be able to pull the data from many different places at once can be an extremely significant burden on any institution," says Diane Fladeland, vice president for academic affairs and keyholder at the University of Mary (Mary) in Bismarck, N.D. "We were putting hundreds of hours into each cycle of IPEDS throughout the year, and it wasn't uncommon to be here at 2 a.m. trying to lock everything down before the submission deadline."

Today, Mary's IPEDS response runs like clockwork, largely due to the involvement of IT managed services provider Dynamic Campus. Dynamic Campus employee Phil Reese has served as director of institutional research for three years, not only spearheading the data collection effort, but also developing scripts that have enabled Mary to quickly turnaround its IPEDS reporting. Working together, Mary and Dynamic Campus have streamlined the process considerably—all three cycles combined now take less than 250 hours—but it didn't happen overnight.

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Winding Up with Data Cleansing

Mary began working with Dynamic Campus eight years ago, bringing Carlo Dacumos on site to serve as chief information officer. Over the years, Dynamic Campus has addressed a variety of critical needs for the institution, including optimizing Mary's business intelligence, infrastructure, asset management and core processes. Once those improvements were in place, the team began a data hygiene project that had tremendous impact on Mary's IPEDS response.



Last-minute scramble
now delivers weeks
ahead of time

"To be more confident in the data we provided, we needed to make sure it was accurate, current and complete," says Fladeland. "Dynamic Campus conducted a yearlong comprehensive data cleanup project that assessed and identified sources of invalid data, determined what database modifications were needed and aligned the data with the right fields."

However, that was only the beginning: ensuring Mary's data stays clean is an ongoing effort. "Not only have we dedicated resources to educating our staff on data entry, but we also established a data management task force

to control the way we use the fields in our software to provide standards and rules for keeping the data clean," Fladeland says. "IPEDS helps us with this; as we identify information we're not entering that we need to, we're able to review, clean and update it to make sure we're on the same page."

Mary's data also undergoes a rigorous validation process. "The student experience generates a large body of data—starting from a prospective student all the way through to alumni," says Reese. "There's a lot of information that needs to be tracked, so we run validation reports on a regular basis to confirm the data remains clean, and we're in the process of developing more."

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Scripts Are the Mainspring

While Mary's data cleanup effort was underway, Reese faced another challenge: automating the IPEDS reporting process. "When I took over the Director of Institutional Research Position, IT was putting data from the student information system and other ancillary systems like PowerFAIDS into a big, huge, spreadsheet and then slicing and dicing it," he says. "If changes needed to be made to that data, or if we needed to look at the data in a slightly different way to answer different questions, we needed to go back to the original data and recreate."

Over the last two years, he has dramatically shortened IPEDS turnaround by developing scripts to automate the process—in fact, NCES commended Mary for submitting its Fall 2017 data three weeks early. "We are a whole lot quicker in getting accurate data out of the system; with scripts in place, all we have to do is change the report parameters and it outputs the necessary data we need to enter into the IPEDS interface," says Reese.

As Reese fine tunes the scripts and builds additional automation into the process, he expects the cycle to be even faster. "There's more refinement that can be done, so we look forward to moving that ball down the field this year some more so that next year we'll be even quicker."



Automated scripts
and data cleansing
initiatives
eliminate waste





All Gears in Synch

As Mary becomes more sophisticated in its IPEDS response, it has noticed other benefits. “With this data, we’re able to see ways we need to use it for decision making—the cleaner it is, the better our reports are, the more everyone wants it and is requesting more reports because the data does give us a large level of confidence going forward,” says Fladeland.

Moreover, having reliable data frees up staff for mission-critical projects. “The more we’re able to rely on our software and databases to enter this data, the more our staff is available for other really important work,” Fladeland says.

As she meets with her counterparts at other institutions, Fladeland sees Mary is now ahead of the curve. “We really feel like we’re humming on all cylinders right now and from the national meetings I attend, I don’t believe our peer institutions can say the same,” she says. “Most of higher education struggles with IT, institutional research and generating the kind of reports necessary for IPEDS is a very painful process in most of higher education today.”

Although the pressure on higher education shows no signs of decreasing, Mary is better prepared to meet its challenges. “We all know that higher education’s accountability is not going to go away; if anything, we’re probably going to be under greater scrutiny than ever, and that means we have to have the data that shows we are accountable,” says Fladeland. “Because Phil has done a yeoman’s job in our IPEDS response, Mary has come a long way. Having reliable data is the culmination of a number of different initiatives, and has become a way of life.”

With scripts in place to draw accurate data from all of its moving parts, Mary’s IPEDS response is poised to keep ticking precisely for years to come.

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