HIGHPOINT

Virginia Community College System Embraces Automation to Improve Compliance and Student Success

The Virginia Community College System (VCCS) consists of a System Office and 23 colleges with 40 campuses. The VCCS is unique in that all of its data from every college resides in one database in PeopleSoft Campus Solutions. The VCCS has been using PeopleSoft since the early 2000s.

One of the issues higher learning institutions have faced is with the Department of Education's (ED) Title IV regulations regarding course applicability. ED has always recognized that the regulations were a strain on institutions but is putting a greater emphasis on the importance of compliance in recent years. Regardless of software limitations, ED expects institutions to find ways to become compliant, forcing schools to look for automated systems to ease the burden.

CHALLENGE:

Verify Course Eligibility Early and Often before Federal Aid Disbursement

As with many higher learning institutions, staying compliant with the federal requirements surrounding course applicability is challenging. Every course that is paid for with federal aid must be applicable to students' degrees or certificates. Without an automated tool to enforce this requirement and with hundreds of thousands of students to manage, the VCCS was at risk of remaining compliant.

For its smaller colleges, manual entry was labor-intensive but still doable. It was another story for the larger colleges, such as Northern Virginia Community College. With approximately 75,000 students, it was impossible to keep up. Laurie Owens, director of Financial Aid at the VCCS, knew something had to change or they could be hit with federal fines. "The only answer was to automate the process," she says. "We wanted to have an automated solution where all we had to do was run a process and it would take care of the eligibility checks for us."

SOLUTION:

HighPoint Financial Aid Course Auditor Automates Process to Reduce Risk and Improve Student Outcomes

VCCS was already using a few HighPoint products and had a strong relationship with the company. "We liked their tools, responsiveness, and the functionality HighPoint had delivered so far," explains Owens. "No other vendor had a similar process. Oracle doesn't deliver an out-of-the-box solution to ensure the courses students take are applicable towards their degree before they're paid for with federal aid."

The results of automating the process with HighPoint Financial Aid Course Auditor (FACA) was instantly remarkable.

Because the colleges had been asking for an automated solution for some time, they readily adopted FACA. Owens and her team brought eight of the colleges live in the fall and the remaining fifteen in the spring. Because HighPoint products are bolted onto PeopleSoft, the look and feel is the same as what users are accustomed to, a feature VCCS greatly appreciates. They don't have to

manage separate systems or become familiar with another platform. Everything they need resides in PeopleSoft Campus Solutions. "FACA leverages pieces of delivered functionality in PeopleSoft but also brings in new capabilities," says Owens. "HighPoint Mobile and the Message Center are the other products from which we are seeing significant benefits."

Owens believes the automation was the differentiator. Before HighPoint FACA, VCCS had no way to be proactive. They were managing the process manually only just prior to disbursement of financial aid, much too late for students to make any enrollment changes because they'd already reached census by the time adjustments occurred.

"As soon as registration began for the upcoming term, we implemented FACA," says Owens. "The system automatically determines which courses are ineligible and then sends notifications to the students. The students have time to meet with an advisor to find out why the course(s) didn't qualify and make enrollment changes or take the right steps to make the course(s) eligible."

Students are reaping the benefits of HighPoint's FACA, voicing their appreciation of being notified of ineligible classes before they waste money and time on courses that don't qualify for financial aid. In fact, many wonder why such an automated system wasn't already in place. Students have time to change their courses before the end of the add/drop period and VCCS is no longer stuck with a receivable they may struggle to collect later.

"In the first run of HighPoint's FACA process, we had some colleges with 25 to 30 percent of their population being tagged with ineligible courses. Over the course of a few months of running FACA, that number came down to below 5 percent for most of the colleges."

- Laurie Owens
VCCS Financial Aid Director

RESULTS

Complete Compliance and Greater Student Success

Today, the VCCS is no longer at risk of paying for courses that do not qualify for financial aid and the colleges are fully compliant with ED's Title IV requirements surrounding course applicability. Compliance, however, should have a spillover effect on the student side. "We anticipate there will be a difference in persistence and completion rates when comparing financial aid students to non-financial aid students," explains Owens. "We suspect that our financial aid students will have better outcomes because they are taking only what they need to fulfill their degrees and will conceivably finish faster. Compliance is a top priority but a nice sidebar is the potential impact on our strategic plan which is to increase completion rates and student success."

When students are made aware of course eligibility in time to make necessary changes, they are more likely to stay on track towards graduation. By being proactive and communicating with students early in the process, the VCCS has improved relationships with the students.

The VCCS also expects to see a reduction in satisfactory academic progress failures when it comes to the maximum time-frame rule. This rule stipulates that financial aid students have only a certain amount of time to complete their degree requirements before they "max out" of financial aid. When the VCCS is only paying for eligible courses, there should be fewer failures of that rule, fewer dropouts, and fewer students having to pay out of pocket for courses.

To date, 40 percent of the VCCS's 250,000 students across all of its colleges are on some form of financial aid with both financial aid applicants and recipients receiving eligibility notifications via FACA. Students are utilizing HighPoint Message Center, where the notifications are delivered, as well as HighPoint Mobile, where the ability to check the Message Center for important messages regarding course eligibility also exists. The Message Center is completely FERPA compliant, enabling administrators to send sensitive information as well as track whether or not students are reading their messages.

"HighPoint gives us a competitive advantage in many ways," says Owens. "I can't imagine that in this day and age, students aren't asking for mobile tools like these over online portals where they have to sit at a computer to complete any tasks. HighPoint gives us the opportunity to communicate with students effectively via their Message Center on their mobile device. The products work seamlessly together so we can communicate with students in a clear and effective way."