Tracking Student Achievement Within Flexible Liberal Arts Program

The State University of New York (SUNY) Potsdam prides itself on offering many choices and paths for students to earn their liberal arts degrees. DegreeWorks from SunGard Higher Education is helping the institution remain flexible and true to its mission.

“A strong part of our mission since the beginning has been to offer choices within our liberal arts programs,” emphasized Ramona Ralston, registrar. “But managing all those choices has been a challenge for us.”

SUNY Potsdam offers very few programs that are considered lockstep. Students can choose from multiple majors and minors. In addition, the requirements for general education and the number of hours required outside the major are fairly complicated. Requirements for the music program are especially complex, varying by instrument and whether a student is working toward a double major.

“It is difficult for both the advisor and student to keep track of how many requirements have been fulfilled, and which substitutions have been approved,” explained Ralston. “The logic in DegreeWorks is built to reflect the way that registrars think in terms of setting up requirements. The output is clear and information is readily available through the Web. It is also easy to show exceptions and substitutions. The solution is a good match for what we needed.”

Profile:
- SUNY Potsdam
- Potsdam, NY
- Undergraduate enrollment: 3,670
- http://www.potsdam.edu

Challenge:
- Track fulfillment of degree requirements while maintaining flexibility in program offerings

Solution:
- SunGard Higher Education DegreeWorks

Results:
- Track student achievement against degree requirements
- Foster rapid acceptance through ease of use
- Assist university goal to increase retention through more meaningful advising support
- Administrators important metrics for planning future term course offerings, streamlining processes for more efficient cost management, and keeping pace with new national and global higher education standards.

“The college has a standing goal to increase retention. Improving advising is one important component of increasing retention, and DegreeWorks has contributed to this effort. The solution assists faculty and staff in becoming better advisors, and gives students self-help tools they can use to stay on track,” said Andy Harradine, assistant vice president for IT at SUNY Potsdam.
Janet van Weringh, senior application specialist, added, “The School of Education had templates on paper showing which courses students had to take, and it varied by their teaching specialization. They asked me to help them track courses that students had taken and still needed to take. I tried several different approaches and was not satisfied with any of them. I believe the Planner in DegreeWorks will solve this issue for them.”

DegreeWorks is a comprehensive academic advising, transfer articulation, and degree audit solution that helps students and their advisors successfully negotiate an institution’s curriculum requirements. Students are less likely to take courses they don’t need and more likely to stay on a direct path to graduation. Available as a fully integrated complement to SunGard Higher Education’s Banner student information system, DegreeWorks can also be easily integrated with any other vendor or homegrown student information system. SUNY Potsdam is integrating the solution with its Banner administrative system. Currently, SUNY Potsdam is live with the basic audit function of DegreeWorks. This function allows users to check a student’s academic history for compliance with the degree program(s), detailing what they have accomplished and what still needs to be done. Throughout the next few registration periods, the University will roll out the Student Planner, “What If?” and GPA calculator functions. The Planner is a tool that allows students to create a personalized semester-by-semester academic plan or to use a template-based plan provided by their department. “What If?” is a powerful tool that allows students and advisors to understand the impact of every academic option. User-friendly GPA calculators keep students on track, eliminating tedious manual calculations.

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Faculty, staff and students readily see value of solution

Faculty and staff had several ideas for how to market the new solution, but the tactics proved unnecessary because of the enthusiastic reception for the program.

“A few advisors showed the software to students, and they told their friends and soon we had students calling and asking how they could access it,” said Ralston. “It’s very user friendly. The day after we sent an email announcing it was available, we had 1,300 students log in (out of a student body of 4,300). We received emails from people thanking us, which almost never happens when we introduce a new procedure.”

Part of the appeal of the solution is its user friendliness and the ability to access the information 24/7. “The output is easy to read and understand,” said Ralston. “Even administrators, like our provost, who do not look at audits regularly, can easily interpret the information. Also the web-based functionality makes it possible for advisors, deans, administrative staff and students to access information from on or off campus.”

DegreeWorks is also making it possible for faculty to have more meaningful advising sessions with students. The solution provides powerful academic planning tools and real-time counseling capabilities. Students receive the academic advice they need to succeed, and advisors gain new capabilities to help them counsel their students more successfully. Advisor note capabilities help advising staff clearly articulate their advice to students and these notes follow students from advisor to advisor.

“DegreeWorks is proving very beneficial for our faculty,” said Ralston. “Our faculty have many obligations in addition to advising. Having a system that simplifies the mechanical and tracking aspects of advising frees up faculty to have more meaningful conversations with students about internships, grad school, and academic performance.”

DegreeWorks also is alleviating the workload of functional staff. For example, staff at the Crane School of Music normally take about two weeks to clear graduates. Because the process is automated within DegreeWorks, the procedure now takes only three to four days. DegreeWorks also has totally eliminated the need to send students junior and senior audits, which previously had to be prepared by hand. Now the audit information is readily available online. “This has saved us considerable time and money for staffing,” said Ralston.

In the future, the University will leverage the aggregated data provided by DegreeWorks to help guide planning. DegreeWorks captures invaluable aggregate information, providing senior
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