

# E-service for Academics

By [Greg Gianforte](#), November 2001

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## 1) Executive summary

Colleges and universities face fierce competition as they seek to recruit and retain students. Admission staffs must interact with growing numbers of applicants across broader geographical areas. These staffs must be able to interact quickly and effectively with candidates to both ensure the efficiency of the process itself and to demonstrate the responsiveness of the institution to student needs.

Once enrolled, students must be cost-efficiently supported as they select and sign up for classes, perform coursework and tests, get their grades, participate in extra-curricular activities and take advantage of other services offered by the institution. If the strain on administrative staff of delivering this daily support can be reduced, so can overhead. Reduction of overhead makes for an economically healthier institution.

The Internet provides an ideal technology platform for both improving the quality of on- and off-campus communications and achieving significant reductions in administrative overhead. *More specifically, Internet-based customer*

*service—"eService"—can deliver accurate, timely and easily accessible information to prospective and existing students and their families as well as staff, alumni and local communities. With eService, colleges and universities can support all of their diverse constituencies with unprecedented cost-efficiency.*

In addition to recruiting and student services, educational institutions have found that eService can improve the quality of and reduce the costs associated with staff support, computer services, alumni relations, sports programs and fundraising.

The most cost-efficient eService solutions being installed at leading academic institutions feature dynamic, "self-learning" knowledge base technology that allows new content to be automatically generated, published and categorized. *This self-learning technology is the key to keeping the cost and effort of maintaining high-quality eService sites to a minimum.*

eService solutions that combine self-service, email management, live chat, workflow rules and feedback tools are proven to streamline critical communications while reducing administrative overhead. Institutions of higher learning that want to survive and thrive in the digital economy should evaluate such eService solutions in order to both significantly improve the quality of their services and significantly reduce their cost of operations.

## **2) The college Web site: recruitment boon or burden?**

The Internet is the medium of choice for students exploring their choices for higher education. Current data from Peterson's CollegeQuest, for example, shows that 83 percent of 15-17 year old high school students use the Internet to scout out their college options. Web-savvy prospects search early and often. According to a new Web Site Effectiveness Study (WSES) developed by Lipman Hearne and fastWeb.com, more than half of the 10,000 surveyed students said they used the Web six or more times in the previous 30 days in search of college

information.

There are several reasons for this. For one, young people and their parents are more Internet-connected than ever. For another, the hours for admissions, financial aid or other offices are traditionally 8 am to 5 pm, Monday through Friday—times when most parents are working and most students are at school. Also, few people enjoy waiting on hold for someone who may or may not be able to answer their questions. It is therefore reasonable that students and parents are turning to the Internet for 24/7 access to the information they seek.

On one level, this is potentially good news for schools seeking to boost enrollments and broaden their applicant pool. After all, now prospective students from all over the country can find about the school and its offerings.

But what does a prospective student actually encounter when they come to a school's Web site? Can they easily find the information they're looking for? Or will they quickly become frustrated and look elsewhere?

*Just as importantly, if they don't immediately find the information they're looking for, what do they do next? Make a phone call? Send an email? If so, is the admissions staff ready to cope with a massive influx of calls and correspondence?*

Clearly, it is important to ensure the information that prospective students seek is easy to find on the Web site. If not, those prospects will look elsewhere and administrative staff will be deluged with inquiries.

Another way to look at this issue is to consider who determines the content of a school's site. In general, site content is determined by university administrators. These managers and staff may or may not know exactly what kind of information prospective students are really looking for. They may or may not know where prospects expect to find such information, either.

*The alternative approach is to let the*

*prospects themselves determine site content.* At first glance, this may seem like an outlandish proposition. How can a college solicit input from an unknown population of prospective applicants?

In fact, this is what an effective eService solution does. It monitors the requests that come from prospective students via communications channels such as phone and email and uses them to determine what should be put in the Web site's self-service area and how prominently it should be displayed. It monitors how students navigate that self-service content and continuously reorganizes itself to put answers where visitors are most likely to look for them. It even asks visitors if the answers they encounter are actually useful or not, so that useful material can be prioritized and useless material weeded out. Intelligent eService solutions therefore take the guesswork out of site content management.

As a result of such a visitor-driven approach, educational institutions deploying intelligent eService solutions have found that *over 96% of all visitors find the answers they're looking for without requiring the intervention of administrative staff.* Considering the cost of every phone call or email that a staff member has to answer (as much as \$20 or more per incident) the cost savings that result from eService can be staggering—in addition to creating a much more helpful, prospect-friendly site.

One reason that eService is so effective at answering prospects' questions online is that the overwhelming volume of inquiries revolve around a relatively small number of issues or knowledge items, such as "How do I get an information packet?" "How do I apply for financial aid?" or "What kind of career services do you offer?" Therefore, because an intelligent eService system can quickly zero in on these dominant queries, it can be extraordinarily efficient at answering visitors' questions online.

The bottom line is this. If a college or university doesn't implement eService, its Web site can be a turn-off for prospects and can wind up generating a tremendous workload of phone calls and emails. Colleges and universities that have implemented

eService, on the other hand, gain the advantage of prospect-friendly sites that provide sought-after information and thereby reduce workloads on recruitment and admissions staff.

### **3) E-service: better campus communications with fewer dollars**

The same principles that make the Internet such an effective platform for recruitment make it a powerful tool for supporting student communities and improving the quality of campus life. After all, just as prospective enrollees and their families are more wired than ever, so are students on campus. In fact, Internet connectivity has become *de rigueur* at most academic institutions. So the Web has become an ideal medium for providing information about all aspects of student life—including courses, finances, activities, health services and school policies.

However, as noted above, the Web is simply an excellent access method. Just as important as the access method is creation and management of the information that's being accessed. To ensure the quality, timeliness and navigability of this information, the implementation of an intelligent eService system is absolutely critical. *Without eService, campus Web sites can simply become one more point of frustration for students and administrators alike.*

With eService, on the other hand, campus Web sites can become extraordinarily effective resources for informing and communicating with student populations of any size or geographic distribution.

The benefits of eService as a campus communications medium include:

- **Accurate and timely information that's easy to find**

Students—especially new ones—have tremendous information needs. They need information about classes and professors. They need answers to their questions about services, facilities and activities. They have to

find housing. And they usually don't look for the information they need until they need it—which means that they need immediate answers to their questions.

Administrative offices are only open during business hours. Printed documents cost money to produce and have to find their way into the right hands at the right time. But a dynamic eService knowledge base is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Self-learning, self-maintaining eService knowledge bases are particularly good for ensuring that the information students are most interested in is also the easiest to find. *That is, information becomes more visible because of the real interest of student Internet users as measured by their site searches. The more a given knowledge item is viewed, the easier it is to locate on the Web site.* When interest subsides, that answer will automatically expire or have a lower profile until it is required again, such as during peak enrollment times or seasonal events.

Similarly, intelligent eService tracks how students navigate their way through the site and automatically categorizes knowledge items based on those navigation paths. This turns out to be a much more effective way to organize content than having site managers dream up their own information "taxonomies." Such navigational optimization becomes especially critical as the amount of information on the site grows. The only way to make sure that students can quickly pinpoint answers to their questions amongst such a plethora of content is to place information where students have already demonstrated that they expect to find it—not where site designers imagine they'll look for it.

- **Dramatically reduced administrative burdens**

When students can easily find the answers to their own questions online, a substantial reduction in

administrative workload results. This produces significant operational cost reductions and allows administrative staff to focus on more strategic tasks.

The particular effectiveness of eService among academic institutions has been documented by Doculabs, an independent analyst firm based in Chicago. Doculabs studied eService implementations in several different markets and found that *educational institutions experienced self-service rates of more than 96 percent*. In other words, of the 8,400 Web site visits during the three-month study, only 317 required additional help through telephone calls or email. This placed education at the top of the eService benefits ladder.

<b>Industry</b>	<b>Site visits</b>	<b>Escalations</b>	<b>Self-service index</b>
Education	8,400	317	96.23%
Financial services	40,574	1,972	95.14%
Computer software	449,402	27,412	93.90%
Consumer products	1,044,199	162,219	84.46%
Telecoms	809,320	202,158	75.02%

*According to Doculabs, educational institutions experience particularly excellent self-service rates when deploying eService.*

It's important to note the converse principle also applies. *A college that doesn't implement effective eService on its Web site will see the frequency of phone calls and emails go up.* According to *A Second Annual Report on the Uses of Internet Technology in College Admissions* (Frank Burnett, Ed.D., February 2001), 65 percent of schools reported that the Internet actually created greater workloads on their administrative staff. eService is the only effective prevention against this common complaint.

- **Ease of site implementation and**

## **maintenance**

Internet-era universities often face a serious dilemma as they try to cope with rapidly changing information technologies. On one hand, they want to stay ahead of the technology curve in order to respond to fulfill their commitment to serving their students and society at large. On the other hand, they are wary of pouring limited capital and human resources into systems that may or may not be worth the investment.

Fortunately, in addition to offering tangible and quantifiable returns on their investments, eService solutions can also be quite easy and cost-effective to deploy. *In fact, many universities have their eService systems up and running within two weeks.*

One reason for this is that self-learning systems don't have to be fully "stocked" with knowledge items before they are launched. Instead, they can be "seeded" with an initial set of items and then allowed to quickly grow over the following weeks. This allows the institution to immediately experience the benefits of eService and then watch those benefits grow over time. Self-learning also reduces the ongoing cost of content management, since it dynamically re-organizes and re-prioritizes knowledge items based on student demand and removes unused and out-of-date items.

Many schools have also found that they can save additional time and money by having their eService content hosted by their eService software vendor. This eliminates the need to install software, manage additional server hardware or provision additional network bandwidth. The hosted eService content is given the same "look and feel" as the institutions own site, but creates no additional burden for in-house IT staff.

In addition to these benefits, eService can help administrators better understand the

needs of students through feedback loops such as online surveys and site metrics. This feedback makes it easier to assess student satisfaction and pinpoint potential areas of improvement.

In fact, eService is an incredibly potent solution for improving communications with students while reducing operational overhead. That's why its use by academic institutions of every type across the country is increasing so rapidly.

#### **4) Leveraging e-service across multiple constituencies**

In addition to communicating effectively with prospective and enrolled students, colleges and universities that have implemented eService are finding it to be an invaluable tool for a variety of other core constituencies, including:

- **Faculty and staff**

College employees have their own information needs - which can include issues such as tenure and promotion, benefits, academic calendars, library resources and research opportunities. Providing this information effectively online can be an important element of a university's HR strategy, improving job satisfaction and employee retention as it reduces staff workloads.

- **Alumni and corporate benefactors**

An eService solution can be leveraged to enhance relationships with vital alumni and corporate constituencies through the creation of specialized, easy-to-navigate content—including class reunion announcements, alumni event calendars, foundation updates, information on fund-raising campaigns and answers to common contribution questions.

- **Sports programs**

Sports programs often have their own significant information requirements—including game schedules, ticket outlet locations, travel directions, team standings, facilities and scholarship policies. This

information is often of interest to the local community, as well as to students, staff and alumni.

- **Technical services**

Technical service teams implementing eService for the benefit of the institution as a whole have also found that they can themselves benefit greatly from an eService system. By posting important information such as virus alerts, network and system changes, problem-solving tips, and access to software and/or documentation downloads, these tech support groups have significantly reduced their volume of incoming phone calls and emails while ensuring students make the most effective possible use of the school's computer facilities.

## **5) E-service for academics: cases-in-point**

Because of its highly attractive value proposition, academic institutions across the country are rapidly embracing eService as a strategic communications platform. eService innovators include Fordham University, Johns Hopkins University, North Carolina State University, Purdue University, Rice University, UCLA, University of Oklahoma, and University of Washington. These schools are already using self-learning eService solutions to streamline admission and registration, reduce the cost of supporting their student communities, and enhance communication with faculty, staff, alumni and parents.

Following are just a few examples of what these institutions are experiencing as they take advantage of today's eService solutions.

### ***University of South Florida***

With 40,000 students and four campuses, the University of South Florida is the state's second largest university system. As a result of its growth, USF's Financial Aid Office experienced a flood of emails — *a problem so overwhelming that counselors needed an average of ten days to respond to a student query*. It wasn't long before complaints about delays began to come in.

In response to this crisis, the USF Information Technology department implemented RightNow Web eService Center from RightNow Technologies. Within just a few days, the self-learning eService solution began to have a noticeable impact on the email load USF's financial aid counselors were experiencing. Information requests are now streamlined as students found answers to routine questions on their own. USF's counselors could then focus their attention on more unusual requests or urgent needs.

Impressed with the software's power and flexibility, USF used the application as part of a major Web site overhaul. Now, visitors can quickly and easily find detailed information about most aspects of campus life without requiring additional help via phone calls or email.

For a first-hand view of USF's site, visit <http://www.usf.edu/>

### ***University of Texas***

Admissions offices aren't always the first "pain point" for a university. Financial aid offices also get heavy traffic. The University of Texas, with an enrollment of 50,000 students, was experiencing a deluge of emails relating to financial assistance—as high as 800 to 1,000 a week during peak times. One staff person acted as a filter for this traffic, directing emails to twenty other counselors to answer.

Realizing that this system was untenable, the university turned to RightNow Web eService Center. It soon had approximately 300 solutions stored in its eService knowledge base, allowing students to find their own answers online. *The number of emails to the financial aid office dropped by about 200 per week.*

"Sending out 15,000 emails when the person doing the filtering was out sick produced a lot of problems," says Larry Burt, the University's director of financial aid. "RightNow greatly lessens the issues surrounding it. Response time is now under 24 hours versus three days before."

For a first-hand view of UT's site, visit

<http://www.utexas.edu/>

### **Walden University**

Walden University, a pioneer in distance learning, depends heavily on the Internet for its success in providing online opportunities for adult learners to earn graduate degrees. As Web use increased, so did the workload on the school's small support staff. But with the implementation of eService, including a dynamic knowledge base, Walden Web site users could begin to find answers for themselves, reducing the staff's need to field redundant queries. The eService application also organized site content so that the answers to the most frequently asked questions became the easiest to find. *The solution can successfully handle a profusion of questions and requests during peak times, eliminating the need for Walden to hire more staff.*

Workflow rules ensure that visitors are quickly assisted when key words in an individual query are recognized. For example, if a student asks about an email account, the system responds with all the information necessary for setting up a school email account.

Walden is now expanding the use of its eService solution to help Human Resources orient new staff and to provide key information to its employees.

For a first-hand view of Walden's site, visit <http://www.waldenu.edu/>

## **6) Conclusion**

Effective Web-based eService provides significant tangible and intangible benefits to institutions of higher learning as they seek to recruit applicants, serve students and reach out to other important constituencies. *Tangible benefits include improved access to important information, reduced cost of operations and the ability to re-direct administrative staff to strategic tasks.* Intangibles include a more positive perception of the institution's responsiveness and a better understanding of the needs of students and faculty alike.

A self-learning knowledge base and ease of implementation are critical to maximizing these benefits while minimizing the cost of attaining them. *In the case of academic institutions, eService is clearly a superb vehicle for harnessing the power of the Web.* And with rapidly deployable, hosted eService solutions available, the ability to put that vehicle into operation is within the reach of every college and university that desires to do so.

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**Greg Gianforte** is founder and CEO of RightNow® Technologies, a Bozeman-based provider of Web customer service systems. Greg, his wife Susan, and their four children have called Bozeman home since 1995. They moved to Montana to achieve a balance between work and family. Greg believes the Internet eliminates geographic boundaries, and that a high tech company can flourish in a non-traditional location like Montana. Greg holds a BE in Electrical Engineering and an MS in Computer Science from Stevens Institute of Technology. He has taught Computer Science at Montana State University as an adjunct professor. Greg co-authored *Reducing the Cost of LAN Ownership and The Business of Running a Network* published by Von Nostram. Prior to RightNow Technologies, Greg was founder and CEO of Brightwork Development, a LAN Management software pioneer acquired by McAfee (now Network Associates) in 1994.

**RightNow Technologies** is a leading global provider of proven eService solutions that deliver rapid time-to-benefit and quick ROI. RightNow was named the second fastest-growing independent software company in the U.S. by Softletter, an industry newsletter. RightNow's comprehensive solutions include Web-based self-service, email response management, live chat and collaboration, and service analytics. These solutions feature an integrated product architecture, highly intuitive interfaces, and centralized workflow management—all based

on a proprietary customer-driven, self-learning knowledge base.

RightNow customers include Air Canada, Ben & Jerry's, Black & Decker, British Airways, Fijitsu, Motorola, Nortel, Sanyo, Social Security Administration, Sprint, and more than 1,100 other organizations in a wide range of vertical markets.

Founded in 1995, RightNow has offices in Bozeman, Dallas, London, Sydney, and Tokyo. RightNow's products are available in 15 languages worldwide.

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