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Student information system anticipates upgrade

Modern software to replace aging system

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When students register for courses through the Pack Tracks system, it is common to wait more than 24 hours before these changes can be seen in their schedule or until they can access the course lockers in WebCT.

Applying for graduation is also a cumbersome process, as students must fill out paper forms and must often go to many different offices to get all the required signatures.

But thanks to a new technology being implemented on campus, these tasks may soon take far less time and effort.

"[The new system] will integrate the services we provide to students," Louis Hunt, vice provost of enrollment management and services, said.

According to Hunt, the project will consolidate the databases of Financial Aid, the Cashier's Office, Admissions and Registration & Records, among other offices on campus.

"Now we'll start to get some synergy between the three systems," he said.

Processes such as registering for classes, gaining access to course lockers and receiving grades will happen in real time under the new system, Hunt said. Graduation applications will be fully automated under the new system, saving the paper chase that graduating students now undergo, he said.

The system will be more efficient for faculty and advisors as well, Hunt said. Faculty members wishing to add students to full courses, or after the deadline, could provide students with an access code number, which they could use to register for the course, he said.

"Hopefully we'll have more opportunities for prerequisite checking, more opportunities for online advising," Hunt said.

Other features will also offer improvements to the current system. It will allow students to make conditional course changes that limit the risk students take when they rearrange their schedule, he said.

For example, a student carrying the maximum course load might wish to add a course in the place of one they already have.

Under the current system, they would have to drop the course in which they are currently enrolled at the risk they may not get into the other course.

Under the conditional course change system, the student could make the drop of one course conditional

upon the addition of another, Hunt said. If the student were unable to get into the desired class, they would retain his/her current one.

All student records will be integrated at the end of this project, Hunt said.

"It's important from the back end that we can move a student from Admissions to Financial Aid and Registration & Records seamlessly," he said.

According to Hunt, the system will also tie course/lab combinations to each other, so adding or dropping one will do the same to the other. Also, the more flexible design is better suited to accommodate joint-degree programs than the existing mainframe system, he said.

"If you look around at other universities, most of them have implemented or are implementing this program," Steve Keto, associate vice chancellor of resource management and information systems, said.

Keto, who is in charge of the implementation phase of the project, said the University purchased the software for the new system about five years ago at a cost of \$889,000.

"The main system is probably about 30 years old -- it's old technology," Keto said.

Hunt said the current information system, which was developed at N.C. State, has become fragmented and more vulnerable to failure. Since it was becoming tough for it to meet the expectations of campus, University officials decided the life expectancy of the system had been pushed beyond reasonable limits and it was time for a change.

"When you have a home-grown system there is a lot of, 'Well, we've never done this before,'" he said.

Oracle will maintain the new information system and periodic upgrades will enhanced it, Keto said.

"The theory is you don't change -- you just put in a new release, which is put out by the vendor," he said.

Although initial problems Big Ten schools experienced delayed the system's implementation on campus, Keto said the errors were fixed and now it is one of the most common systems at major universities.

"There are a lot of big schools running the program," Keto said.

Hunt expects the system to be fully operating from the student's perspective by spring 2008.

The main drawback will be the difficulty of implementing such a large-scale change, he said.

"We'll be better off at the end, but getting there takes a lot of hard work, effort and cooperation from the campus community," Hunt said.

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