HIGHER EDUCATION TREND REPORT

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Streamlining Information Flow to Improve Admissions Processes

In This Report

- How can institutions tweak admissions processes to better serve students while driving productivity?

- **Automatically track student information.** Discover how, in an age of huge amounts of student information, from transcripts to health information and beyond, admissions departments can efficiently and effectively keep track of it all.

- **Create two-way conversations.** Leverage those mass quantities of student information to more specifically speak to their interests, helping them to make informed decisions about the institution they attend and admissions to attract students who are well suited for enrollment.

- **Cut costs, drive productivity and improve application turnaround time.** Learn how streamlining processes can make running an admissions department more cost-effective – and potentially improve enrollment and reputation.

In a recent survey conducted by Harris Poll on behalf of Ricoh, it was made clear that Americans are taking into account what technology a university utilizes when deciding which schools to apply to and attend. In the Poll, 93% of Americans said they expect colleges and universities to use the latest technologies in the administrative process. Added to this, 81% said that their opinion of a school improves when they know that it uses the latest technology.

As more students continue to apply to universities, and each student applies to more universities, the competition among universities for top students is fierce. Schools realize this and know that one way they can stand out is through technological capabilities.

In fact, schools were projected to spend $6.6 billion on IT upgrades in 2015, according to IDC Government Insights[1]. But a large portion of the funds will go toward upgrading computers, instead of improving the back-end systems that provide the framework for management and administration that keep a university running well. In fact, investments in data and document storage can bolster a school's ability to improve student performance. For example, Georgia State University began using digital records to flag troubled students and saw its graduation rate improve by 3% in two years[2].

Managing All Types of Student Documents Within an Admissions Office

Admissions departments must handle a variety of different types of confidential information, including Social Security numbers, health records, grades, transcripts, financial aid and alumni information.

Having a centralized system where documents can be uploaded and stored helps ensure information is securely accessible and provides various departments the ability to index, archive, organize and understand data, which helps transform them into better, more intelligently run organizations. This means, for example, after the admissions office approves the graduation status of a student, the student's information is automatically added to the alumni association's database. This kind of efficiency and synergy is best delivered through an admissions process that seamlessly integrates documents whether they come in by mail, fax or online.

Having an admissions process that includes quickly digitizing documents - no matter what part of the organization or what form the original comes in - will break down the silos that prevent information from being shared among the various parts of the institution.

Western Kentucky University, a school with 20,000 students based in Bowling Green, had 150,000 paper transcripts representing students who attended the school from 1906 to 1990. The decades' worth of data sat in a vault lined with file cabinets. If a student requested a transcript, an employee had to walk down to the vault, locate the transcript, make a copy, re-file the original, and, after all that, return to the registrar's office and prepare it for the mail, so it could reach its destination in however many days shipping took.

At the same time, the Human Resources Department wanted a more efficient solution for managing staff and personnel records of its 2,500 employees. HR employees entered information manually into an electronic system and then filed the paper documents in a separate room, creating similar problems when information had to be retrieved.

Western Kentucky decided to test a new solution on 23,000 transcripts from former and current students, which included 65,000 images, which could potentially baffle some optical character recognition (OCR) methods. By scanning the images using a barcode unique to each student, the school could digitize the documents, images and all, which included a wide range of sensitive and personal information, including Social Security numbers, addresses and identification numbers. The HR department tested the system with ten personnel files, which comprised more than 2,000 documents and included driver's licenses, resumes, background checks, letters of recommendation, and other documents that the university needed to compile in order to make hires. Leveraging advanced scanning processes, all the documents were added to HR's enterprise database, making it easier to locate information when it was needed, saving employees time and, as a result, saving the university money.
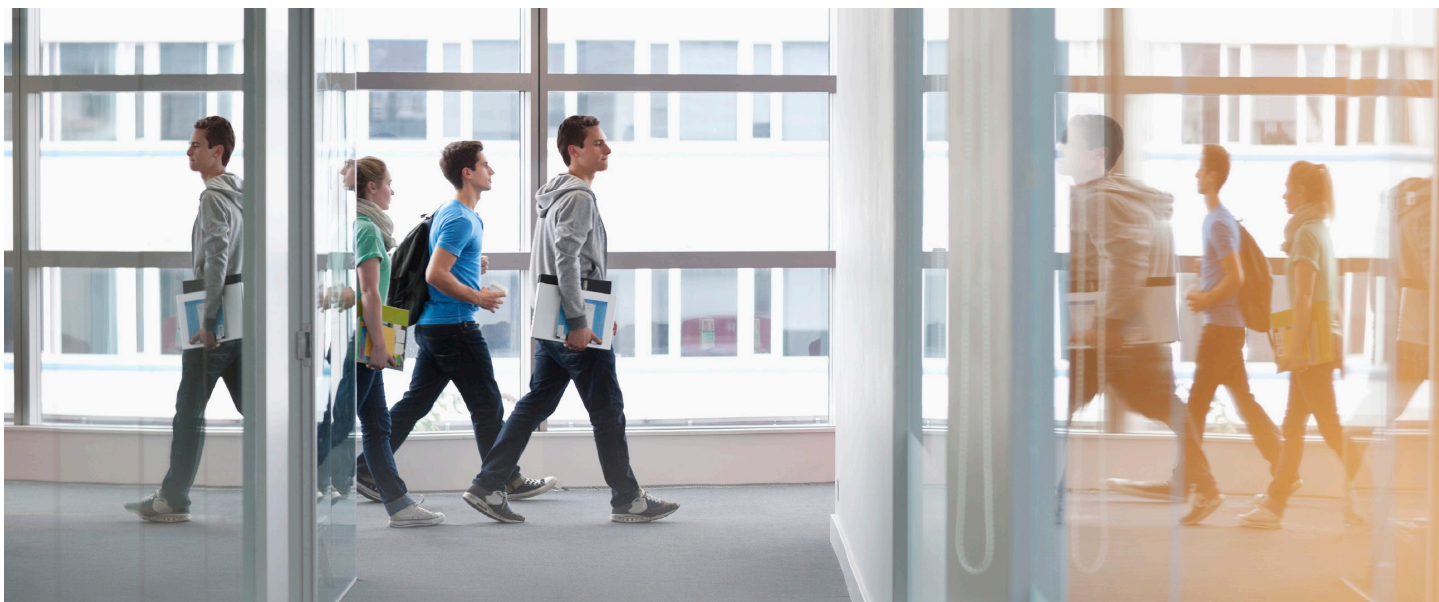
Leveraging New Strategies to Keep Admission Information Safe, No Matter the Form

The survey found that nearly two-thirds (65%) of Americans doubt schools have the proper security measures in place to secure their students' confidential information due to budgetary constraints. Meanwhile, 53% have heard of admissions information getting misplaced. Where has this lack of faith in document security come from? And how can institutions of higher education address it?

One of the most common ways for a document to be misplaced is if it's left sitting out, waiting to be filed. Such files can be misfiled, stolen, or simply lost. The faster information can be digitized, the less opportunity for calamity to strike the paper documents.

That's where mobile capture enablement can help. If a student is able to snap their driver's license with their cellphone and send it to the admissions department, where it is automatically integrated into the workflow there, there's no opportunity for a faxed or mailed copy to sit on someone's desk and slow down the process – or get knocked to the floor, or stolen. The same is true for admissions employees receiving documents, who, with mobile capture capabilities, can capture student information the moment it comes in, as opposed to having everyone in the department crowd around the scanner(s).

65% of Americans doubt schools have the proper security measures in place

35%

65%
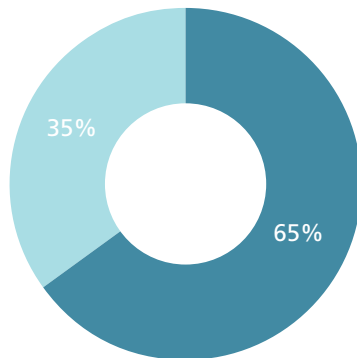
53% of Americans have heard of admissions information getting misplaced

47%

53%
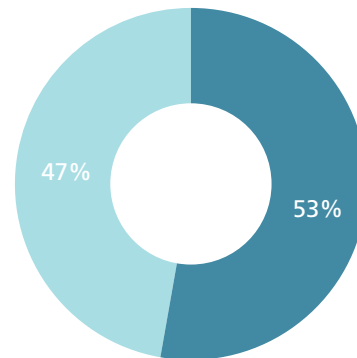
Source: A recent survey by Harris Poll on behalf of Ricoh.
Ricoh/Harris Poll. October 28, 2015.

By utilizing a centralized system, you can secure information access by providing students with a unique PIN code. Some university departments, like Research & Development, may have even stricter access requirements. To address these different security levels, you can adjust data accessibility per file, folder or database, providing access to specific individuals, departments and so on. You can also designate certain files as only accessible from university grounds, denying many types of malicious actors access, without significantly infringing on availability to rightful users.

Student Expectations

Mobile capture enablement and data security are also in line with students' expectations for schools. Nearly every student (93%) expects universities to use the latest technology, according to the Poll.

Daily Device Usage Among College Sudents

Device	Usage
Smartphones	83%
Laptop	89%

Source: Pearson Student Mobile Device Survey, 2015.

With more than 80% of students[3] utilizing a smartphone and nearly 90%[3] using a laptop daily, having ways for students to share their information in a secure format that can easily adapt to your enterprise database, like with mobile uploads, assures them that your institution is capable of providing them the level of swift service to which they have become accustomed.

Automating Communications With Students

Students apply to a number of different schools. The upper-echelon students often send applications to more than 10 institutions, according to the New York Times[4]. This is why having an admissions tool that can also track and automatically coordinate the information a student needs will improve the application process for both the university and the student. The ability to also upload information via mobile capture enables two-way communication between students and the admissions office. Plus, the conversation occurs on hardware that students prefer. With students ranking technological communications capabilities on college review sites, like College.niche.com, potential students are even basing their college choice on the technology that administrators and faculty use to communicate with them.

A large university with over 50,000 students lacked visibility into its admissions department to such a degree that it was unsure how many applications it received each year. While this was a regulatory issue, it also created problems with potential students, as the school couldn't properly communicate with applicants. Students would contact admissions to check if their information had been received, and the school couldn't offer them a clear answer. That is, not until an admissions officer manually tracked down the student's information, a timely process that meant the student was left waiting and the employee's productivity ground to a halt during the search.

The school manually transmitted applications as they were received, which created this confusion. To address this challenge, it transitioned to a solution that scanned the applications as they were delivered, at the university's mail center. This information was automatically uploaded to the admissions department, with data quickly and easily integrated into the admissions department's back-end systems. The new approach also automated communications with prospective students to confirm receipt of their application and providing them with a way to check on their enrollment status. In addition to improving the university's ability to track metrics around applications received versus students admitted, a sorely missed capability in their previous system, this automated solution freed up admissions officers to focus on applications, as opposed to coordinating application updates, which hastened turnaround times, a vital difference in an age when competition for students is fierce and a slow-in-coming acceptance letter can cost a university a top student.

This level of automation – and streamlining and ease of access – can continue throughout a student's time at the university, providing updates for new classes, financial aid and the health center, among other areas of the school, should an institution choose to broaden their database outside of admissions.

Enabling Flexibility After Implementation

A common misconception of admissions is that every student's application comes in in the same format, following the same guidelines. However, due to the diverse backgrounds of students, admission officers need a variety of different forms and information that may not always come standard. For instance, different kinds of non-traditional students – those that once served in the military, as opposed to those coming to a university from out of the country, for example – need to provide different types of forms from each other, and both types of students have to provide forms different from your "regular" domestic, straight from high school applicant. In order to enable the flexibility needed to seamlessly manage this process, having consultants available who understand the variety of issues that can arise can be crucial. Such consultants can address potential snags in the automation process through design, implementation, change management and improvements. One such hurdle: It's common for a solid majority of applicants in a school's pool of potential students to not attend that school. But a file was automatically created for each and every applicant – a file that may not be automatically deleted when a student does not enroll. That can lead to thousands of unenrolled applicants' information weighing down a system, making it harder to respond to requests, which can frustrate students and make it harder for employees to do their jobs – costing the university in lost productivity, and, potentially, in lost prospective students. A third party can improve the admissions office workflow, reduce the number of documents and ensure the entire process remains efficient.

Key Takeaways:

- More and more, schools recognize that they need to invest in IT upgrades. Implement a strategy to revamp admissions processes, which can provide a framework for your university's operations.

- With the various documents and information a school may need to store, it's important to leverage technologies that enable all departments, not just admissions, to access relevant documents with ease.

- Research shows that U.S. adults believe universities can't keep students' confidential information secure, an issue universities can address by adopting a secure system that files documents easier and faster.

- Slow, manual processes interfere with universities' ability to provide the quick responses students require to make their enrollment decisions.

Methodology

This survey was conducted online within the United States between August 31-September 2, 2015 among 2,053 adults (aged 18 and over, among whom 170 are college students, by Harris Poll on behalf of Ricoh via its Quick Query omnibus product. Figures for age, sex, race/ethnicity, education, region and household income were weighted where necessary to bring them into line with their actual proportions in the population. Propensity score weighting was used to adjust for respondents' propensity to be online.

Sources

1. "The Pivot Table: U.S. Education IT Spending Guide." IDC Government Insights.

2. "How Georgia State University used data-driven interventions to add $3M in tuition revenue." EAB.com

3. Pearson Student Mobile Device Survey, 2015.

4. "Applications by the dozen as students hedge college bets." New York Times.

To learn about Ricoh solutions for higher education, visit
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