Streamlining processes for recruiting and admitting students

Kent State University is a public research university located in Kent, Ohio. One of the largest universities in Ohio, with an enrollment of nearly 41,000 students, it is an eight-campus system with nearly 27,500 graduate and undergraduate students. The university offers more than 300 undergraduate and graduate degree programs and certificates, including programs in liquid crystals, library science, aeronautics and nursing. Kent State is ranked among the top 100 national public universities in U.S. News & World Report’s Top Public Schools ranking in its 2017 edition of Best Colleges.

Facilitating the transition to a cloud-based environment

Success in recruiting qualified students in sufficient numbers is the lifeblood of any university, and universities are in competition for a finite number of such students. Integrated, high-quality data that enables a university to identify and communicate with such students via personalized, consistent messages is critical to recruiting success.

Like other universities, Kent State receives data related to admissions, such as standardized test scores and lists of candidates, from many sources. In its efforts to aggregate that important data, Kent State found itself dealing with a “spaghetti mess” of many point-to-point integrations among disparate systems. "The result was added complexity, a lack of consistency, and data synchronization issues," says Brian Zahn, Applications Developer for Kent State University.

The university’s data challenge was further complicated by its hybrid environment: it has an on-premises Banner ERP system, but its Salesforce CRM and other SaaS applications live in the cloud. “We recognized that we needed to stop building one-off integrations and find a single tool to function as a centralized data management platform,” says Zahn.

Why Talend?

To find the right solution to serve as a centralized integration hub, Kent State put out an RFP and evaluated software from several vendors. “One of the advantages we saw right away with Talend is the ability to build reusable components and to use a drag-and-drop approach to app development,” says Zahn. “That’s part of what makes it a rapid application development platform, which we can use to help us accomplish our objective of shortening development times. We also liked the fact that Talend provides data integration, ESB, data quality and master data management all in one toolset.”

“Talend is a platform that helps us integrate multiple systems, put structure around data movement, and make data work for us,” says John Rathje, CIO for Kent State University. “We use it to manage and understand data, and as a framework for capabilities like deploying a more structured approach to reporting and analytics.”

The cloud-native character of Talend also helped decide Kent State in its favor. “We saw that Talend Cloud would enable us to build and run integration jobs, then deploy them on remote engines,” says Zahn. “We can use the scheduling capabilities of Talend Cloud while still being able to access our on-premises data using the remote engines. The more we use Talend, the more value we see and the more use cases become apparent where we can use its capabilities to achieve better results faster.”
Managing the admissions process

A key Kent State system that relies heavily on Talend is CollegeNET, the school’s CRM system for managing the admissions process for graduate and international students. Talend is the critical component that integrates CollegeNET with Banner, an ERP widely used in higher education. “That’s an innovative integration in the world of higher ed,” says Cynthia Roberts, Lead Applications Developer for Kent State. “It allows us to avoid having to create a custom .NET application to bring admission decision information from CollegeNET into Banner and prevents us from having to manually enter the same information twice, which many schools have to do.” She says the integration also makes it possible to sync data nightly, so that changes in Banner are replicated in CollegeNET.

Roberts adds that by catching faulty data early, Talend Cloud Data Stewardship has eliminated the need for admissions staff to manually change data in Banner. “That used to take up to 20 minutes per applicant,” she says. “With Talend checking the data, we’ve been able to save that time.”

Currently, Kent State’s main ERP and data warehouse are on-premises, but plans are to move both source and target systems to the cloud. “Once we’re there,” says Holly Slocum, Director of Process Evaluation and Improvement for Kent State, “the flexibility the Talend cloud engines give us will enable us to avoid moving data in the cloud to an on-prem remote engine, then back up to the cloud. We also plan to look into installing Talend in an AWS or Microsoft Azure instance. If we want to take advantage of services from cloud providers, we’re not stuck with running the engine on-prem.”

According to Cassandra Reeder, Lead Programmer Analyst for Kent State, Talend played a huge role in supplying a wide range of data to multiple orgs in Salesforce. “With SaaS software, you can only access your data through APIs,” she says. “Integrating via a unified platform like Talend made it so much easier. And having all the functionality of Talend to manipulate the data coming from an ERP made it possible for us to present data the way business users need it.”

Reeder adds that Talend enabled the school to integrate between 25 and 50 separate sources containing purchased lists of names of prospective students and import the data into Salesforce to be used in recruiting communications. “Talend’s prebuilt connectors, and especially the Salesforce connector, saved us so much time,” she says, “because we could simply drag and drop a component onto our palette rather than having to custom code connections for all those Salesforce APIs.”

According the CIO Rathje, other institutions in higher education can also use a similar holistic, enterprise-wide approach.