January 2014: News from the SIS Project

OUR FINAL UPDATE

Implementing a new student information system happens once in a generation. Though the old system served us well, portions of it were 25 to 30 years old and did not interface well with related, modern applications. iSIS is far more sophisticated and robust. Now, Tufts has a system that is available more consistently, provides new data reporting opportunities, and has the assurance of vendor support. Because the iSIS implementation was tied to Tufts’ multiple academic calendars, our ability to include some desired customizations within one academic year was limited. There is more work to be done.

Over the next six months, the SIS Project team will develop and integrate functionality to support summer school registration, continue its work on student financials, and operationalize the production support of iSIS. The stabilization of each major component that has been put in place will continue through June 2014. Management of iSIS will transition to Tufts Technology Services (TTS) and technical staff will continue to share responsibility with our schools and experts in student services, to make sure we are working on what matters most to our students, faculty and advisors.

The SIS Project will finish on time and on budget. Despite incredible challenges, complicated discussions, and difficult problems, people came together to get it done. We focused our efforts on a singular goal: to do what is best for our students and faculty. None of this could have been accomplished without strong partnership and leadership from all of our schools and student services departments.

GOVERNANCE

Starting in March 2014, TTS and the schools will form a governance committee for iSIS to help manage desired changes to the system. The committee will make sure Tufts continues to share practices across schools where practical and possible, while also recognizing that there are unique needs in the schools.

The committee will be an analog to the current SIS Project Steering Committee, though membership and participation may change to be sure we have appropriate representation among our various application owners.

Governance committee members will be responsible for understanding the needs of their school or area in a broad university context. According to Mark Damian, Director of Enterprise Applications and Business Intelligence at TTS, after the new committee finalizes membership, it will endorse a charter and collaboratively develop a process to prioritize projects in time for the FY2015 budget cycle. There will be formal mechanisms and criteria to understand context and inform prioritization.

THE ROLE OF TTS

Through the course of the SIS Project, we believe we found a better way to support Tufts’ student information system, which is very complex and uses many different technologies. Service oriented analysts across all aspects of student services and experts of different technologies were under the leadership of one person. Because this model was successful for the SIS Project, TTS will leverage it going forward with the support and maintenance of iSIS.
Over a three year period, from July 2011 through the summer of 2014, the SIS Project will implement the new Integrated Student Information System (iSIS) with PeopleSoft Campus Solutions as its technology core. For more information about iSIS or the SIS Project, email sisproject@tufts.edu or visit go.tufts.edu/sis.

SPRING REGISTRATION UPDATE

In November 2013, for the second time ever, students used iSIS to register for classes. The iSIS team was prepared to address any issues that came up, and because of lessons learned in March (for fall class registration), registration for spring term classes was largely quiet.

Between fall and spring registration, the team addressed access issues by creating dynamic data security roles based on iSIS data maintained by the Registrars rather than request-driven access lists. Because of this new, behind-the-scenes process, the iSIS team can automatically assign appropriate security roles to faculty, advisors, and teaching assistants who are active employees or affiliates.

Confidence in iSIS data comes from many months of sheer dedication by Tufts and CedarCrestone staff, who examined enrollment data more times than they were scheduled to. In the end, the student record conversion efforts yielded few data errors. Transcripts in iSIS, which are a key deliverable, are amazingly accurate.

RECENT GO-LIVES, IMPROVEMENTS AND ENHANCEMENTS

iSIS continues to evolve to meet the needs of students, faculty, advisors and schools. Since September 27, 2013 (around the date of our last SIS Project Update), eighty-five distinct items have been rolled into production. Most of these updates were planned in advance; all show a commitment to continuous and incremental improvement. Here are highlights from the last two and a half months.

- iSIS gives faculty advisors the ability to set a mail client preference under “My Advisees.” This new feature supports both Apple Mail and Outlook users by generating an email list of advisees, separated by commas or by semi-colons, respectively.
- Students in most schools have a link to view their graduation status from their home page once they have applied for graduation.
- iSIS now flags waitlisted classes in the student schedule.
- iSIS provides a reporting facility for faculty and advisors in Arts and Sciences and Engineering (AS&E), replacing some reports previously available in WebCenter.
- Grade rosters now show students from all combined sections in one list.
- Single Sign On is enabled to directly link students from iSIS to WebCenter and to StarRez.
- AS&E undergraduates may now request a Transfer of Credit or Leave of Absence through iSIS. This significant and integrated functionality enables faculty to view and approve student requests and track the approvals process via a visual workflow within the application. With regards to transfer credit requests, iSIS will indicate which requirement a transfer credit course meets, removing some of the guess work previously required.

KEYS TO SISVILLE SYNERGY

Co-location. Given the complexity of the SIS Project, locating key staff in one place, focused on the same goal, was critical.

Group brainstorming. Because teams in SISville shared rooms, multiple people would hear about a problem, and weigh in if they could. This often led to people taking in multiple perspectives and whittling down the problem to come up with a solution that made sense.

Dedicated people. Folks in SISville care about the services they are providing to students and faculty, and do not want anything to come across as second rate.

Need to succeed. The legacy SIS was unsupported; a successful implementation was the only option. We could have limped over the finish line, but that is not in the nature of anyone on this project.

Strong leadership. When conversion felt like it was in trouble, the SIS Project’s leadership teams came through, asking: “what can we do to help?” and followed through.
The Academic Advising (AA) tool in iSIS went live on October 7, 2013 to advisors at Arts and Sciences and Engineering, and on October 15, 2013 to undergraduates. Previously, it had been available to students and faculty advisors at the Medical School’s Public Health and Professional Degree Programs, the Sackler School, and the Friedman School.

Integrating AS&E’s complex academic advising requirements into iSIS was extremely challenging and the iSIS team had to significantly modify the system to make it work. While there are still a few quirks to work out, the benefits of integration with enrollment will make the extra effort worthwhile.

The AA tool combines the advising report with registration, a process that was previously managed in two discrete systems. Having two tools in one place enables undergraduates to view an online degree audit and enroll in classes straight from the report. Because the AA tool is tied to the Course Catalog, undergraduates can also explore courses offered next term, and add them to their planner or their shopping cart (when available).

The iSIS team will continue to improve the Advising Report and the data within it, to better support student and faculty advisors who rely on this feature.

As of October 26, 2013, iSIS enables students to grant view-only access to their academic or financial records. The Invited Viewer Portal replaces WebCenter for Parents and allows students to invite anyone with an email address at any time, for any duration. Students can choose to share any or all of the following: their biographical/demographic information, their bills, balances, financial aid information, grades, and transcripts, or generate an enrollment verification report.

Those who are invited to “view” a student's record can register on the site, get a profile and view the information they have been approved to see.

Since the Invited Viewer Portal rolled out, more than 600 users have been invited by students to view their information, and approximately 440 have accepted the invitation.

The Invited Viewer Portal complements but is separate from functionality offered through the Sallie Mae eBill site, which allows students to enable parents to pay their bill online.

As anticipated, the SIS Project team updated the PeopleSoft software that underpins iSIS in late December. This work required a significant amount of downtime, which was noted on the Tufts InfoBoard, located online at http://infoboard.tufts.edu/.

This was the first time the iSIS team applied PeopleSoft bundles to iSIS, a task that represents an ongoing need to evaluate, develop and test updates from the application vendor. The iSIS team hopes to learn from this process and identify ways to improve the efficiency of this process in the years to come.

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