Open Standards, Open Networks

Five Principles and Actions to Achieve Open Exchange of Electronic Student Records

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Parchment was founded in 2003, operating one of the earliest eTranscript exchanges in the academic community. In 2004, the nascent stage of eTranscripts meant Parchment had to print and mail more than 90% of the secondary school transcript orders we received online. Today, with 25% of U.S. secondary schools on the Parchment Exchange, that number is less than 3%, representing a stunning shift from paper to electronic by a large segment of America’s high schools.

We believe U.S. postsecondary institutions are on the verge of a similar tipping point. Key to unlocking this potential are open standards and open governance leading to broad-based interoperability among the eTranscript technologies in use by colleges and universities across the country. This has been the approach behind EDI standards developed through collaboration, lead by the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO) committee for the Standardization of Postsecondary Education Electronic Data Exchange (SPEEDE), and the newer XML standards developed by members of the P20W Education Standards Council (PESC). Parchment has been an active proponent of both efforts. Parchment is one of only two companies to be awarded the PESC seal of approval for the verified implementation of approved PESC data standards, and has supported the EDI standards developed by SPEEDE since 2008.

Since the announcement that the SPEEDE Server (“Texas Server”) operated by the University of Texas at Austin will be transitioning to the National Student Clearinghouse, a vendor of eTranscript services, the question of open standards and open networks has risen to the forefront once again. At issue is not how they operate their exchange, but a simple and important question about the future of the Texas Server: Will a community governance mechanism be put in place to provide stakeholders who rely on the Texas Server -- academic organizations and the technology platform operators who serve them -- with rights and responsibilities in setting the future of such a critical shared resource? Or will the server be operated unilaterally by a single provider with whom individuals and institutions that exchange through the server have no standing?

In preparation for conversations at the 2013 AACRAO Annual Meeting, we propose five fundamental principles we believe are central to realizing the vision of broad-based electronic
student record adoption so presciently detailed in the 1997 Business Case for the Electronic Exchange of Student Records published by SPEEDE. We also describe the concrete steps Parchment has taken to implement these principles.

1. **Networks Should Not Limit Where Transcripts can be Sent**

   While there is value in universities choosing among alternative transcript exchange networks - working to drive innovation while driving down cost -- the exchange of transcripts and other student records should not be limited by the existence of proprietary exchanges.

   **What Parchment has done:** Beginning in 2009, Parchment has worked to expand the reach of Senders on the Parchment Exchange beyond Parchment’s Receiver network. First, we implemented integration with The Common Application (comprised of 488 member colleges). Second, we recently implemented integration with the Texas Server and its (on-average) 280 recipients. Third, we implemented integration with California’s eTranscript CA network. Finally, although the pilot is still in its design stages, we announced a cross-vendor integration pilot with ConnectEDU as part of EdExchange, a project of the PESC Common Data Services (CDS) Task Force. Together, these four examples represent concrete investments to ensure Parchment Send members can deliver not only to the 1,500+ Receive members on our platform, but to any destination represented among these networks.

2. **Networks Should Not Limit From Where Transcripts are Received**

   Just as an institution’s delivery options should not be limited by their chosen e Transcript provider, their ability to receive transcripts should not necessitate integrations with numerous providers – adding complexity to what should be an opportunity to drive more efficient processes to receive inbound transcripts. To facilitate this principle, Parchment is committed to a free and open receiver network.

   **What Parchment has done:** With the launch of the Universal Inbox within Parchment Receive, Parchment is one of only two providers to foster cross network interoperability, for a free and open exchange. Parchment now enables member institutions to aggregate the receipt of transcripts from our 7,400+ members along with the 187 institutions (March 2013) sending standards-based transcript data over the Texas Server, and those that originate with the eTranscript California network. Additionally Parchment is working with Credentials Solutions to enable members of the Parchment Exchange to “trade” with schools using Credentials Solutions TranscriptsPlus, and is actively working to add additional proprietary networks and state exchanges, including ASU Pathways.

3. **Transcript Data Files and Exchange Protocols Should be Standards-Based**

   In order to maximize the reach for senders and receivers of transcripts, Parchment encourages the creation and adoption of standards for both the data files and the protocols used for the exchange of transcripts between networks.
What Parchment has done: Parchment continues to explore opportunities to expand the breadth of our delivery network and is an active supporter of, and participant in, the PESC CDS Task Force, whose members are working to develop the standards that will enable the exchange of transcripts and other data between participating exchange networks. A member of PESC since 2004 when Parchment contributed to the development of the XML schema for the High School transcript, Parchment is one of the few organizations active in both the secondary and higher education standards communities, including membership in the SIF Association since 2006.

4. Shared Resources Should Be Operated Under Shared Governance

As active members of the e Transcript community and on behalf of our 1,600+ postsecondary Exchange members, we believe that since the Texas Server is a hub that sits at the intersection of several e Transcript networks, it should be operated under an open and shared governance approach similar to services like InCommon.

What Parchment has done: In the spirit of our role in the e Transcript community, Parchment joined with Credentials to call for the National Student Clearinghouse to create a project with stakeholders including academic organizations, Parchment, Credentials, and other entities who exchange data through the server, or to participate in a new service-provider-agnostic consortia that contracts with the Clearinghouse to operate the Texas Server under its governance. Under this transparent community-based approach, the Texas Server would be funded by a cross-section of the service providers who benefit from it, with the standing required to honor commitments to their members. If the Clearinghouse decides not to allow other exchange providers to participate in the governance of the Texas Server, the inevitable outcome is that those organizations launch a new exchange server that does operate under consortia governance. Great effort should be made to avoid what would be unfortunate fragmentation.

5. Openness Needs to be Balanced With Security and Trust

While we call for networks to be open, this call is balanced with our responsibility to safeguard our institutional members’ data. Parchment and other operators of e Transcript exchanges make commitments to our members about the do’s and don’ts of how their transcripts are processed from student order through fulfillment. We believe that every network should operate under the terms and conditions associated with membership of institutions in their network; the issue arises when these networks exchange across each other. For example, Parchment explicitly commits in our data policy not to build an education record repository through our e Transcript exchange service. Inter-network exchange requires clear policies and practices that provide confidence in the integrity of those commitments.

What Parchment has done: As with Principle #4, Parchment has joined with other organizations to call for any “hub” technology that connects various networks to be operated under a shared governance model. Part and parcel of such a consortia approach would be the development of clear policies and commitments related to data security and privacy, to which participants in inter-network exchange would agree.