Texas A&M harnesses power of XML

Texas A&M has harnessed the scalability and interoperability of XML without requiring its faculty, staff and IT professionals to change the computer language of their choice.

As part of its efforts to convert its student information system from a mainframe to a Web-based system, Texas A&M found that XML gave it the ability to allow access to information maintained in a legacy Adabas DBMS system on an IBM3090-class mainframe and was platform and object-model neutral.

However, choosing XML as the base language was only the first step of the process. The team in charge of technology evaluation, headed by Tim Chester the university's senior IT manager, began its search for a middleware solution that would allow the university to continue using the computer languages it had in the past.

The team decided to employ Software AG's EntireX, a middleware application that allows for message queuing, synchronous request and reply, and conversational communication. These tools enable the university to provide static information as well as peer-to-peer conversation capabilities to better serve its constituencies.

"We're working with it for systems integration between the mainframe and the Web," said Chester. "Right now, we're focusing on student information applications."

On the website "Beyond the Code" Chester explains that the university's community writes in a variety of languages—Con UNIX, some in Java, some in Visual Basic on a Microsoft platform, and others in Perl on Linux. Any of these languages are translated into XML once they are sent to the EntireX system.

With varying programming language problems rendered virtually non-existent by the EntireX system, interoperability among unconnected servers and operating systems is allowing the university to expand the usefulness of many of its old systems. Everything from student records to
May was an extremely busy month for the XML Forum.

The Technology Work Group and Core Components members converged to create an ad hoc committee, with technical expertise provided by Garret Minakawa of Oracle, in order to successfully complete an XML schema for postsecondary academic transcripts.

Bruce Marton, Architecture Team Chair of the XML Forum, presented the newly created XML schema to the Education Administration Subcommittee of ANSI ASCX12 at their trimester meeting in Minneapolis on June 1. Subcommittee members reviewing the schema and providing feedback on its design expressed enthusiasm for the schema’s completeness and appreciation for the effort XML Forum volunteers put into developing the schema. The Transcript Work Group members will now take the suggestions provided by Subcommittee A and modify the base dictionary and transcript schema. The transcript schema will then be reviewed by XML Forum members and sent to the Steering Committee for approval as a formal XML Forum output. Marton estimates that the transcript schema will be released on or before July 15, 2002.

The Core Components Work Group continues to develop the base data dictionary, including Financial Aid and Admissions/Registrar data elements. Financial Aid data elements are currently being moved into the aggregate structure developed at the XML Forum Task Force meeting held in Washington, D.C., in April.

Volunteers are also in the process of reviewing tag names for compliance with naming standards defined at the February XML Forum meeting in Miami. Adele Marsh, co-chair of the Core Components Work Group, stated that she anticipated each task to be completed in the next couple of weeks.

As if all of this weren’t enough, Core Components volunteers have also been providing support to the NCHELP ESC committee to identify data requirements needed by CommonLine for development of a CommonLine schema. Marton plans to have this schema ready for community review in September.

The Postsecondary Electronic Standards Council and the XML Forum for Education will hold meetings in conjunction with the Electronic Data Interchange in Education Conference at the WestCost Grand Hotel in Spokane, WA all day Tuesday, Oct. 22 and until noon on Wednesday, Oct. 23. Be on the lookout for information on the hotel rates, room blocks and meeting events.

For more information on the XML Forum, please visit our website at www.pescxml.org, or contact Ane al-Sayyed at alsayyeda@standardscouncil.org.
Letter from the Chair

Dear Friends and Colleagues:

No doubt you have heard by now of Betsy’s resignation as PESC’s Executive Director. Noting that the alternative was to ask her to stay behind while her husband moved to Italy, the Board regretfully accepted her resignation.

While we hate to see Betsy leave us, we are grateful that she has provided us with six months notice to provide for a seamless transition to a new Director.

While every transition invariably has its little hiccups, the Board is committed to working diligently to ensure a smooth transition and to maintaining the focus on electronic standards. It is with this diligence that we are actively seeking applicants now in order to select an incumbent that will come on staff in the Fall and spend a couple of months working with Betsy before she leaves.

We believe that such a transition plan will allow for an uninterrupted continuation of the services that you, the PESC membership, have come to expect.

At this time we are currently looking for qualified candidates that have an interest in school centric electronic standards. The successful incumbent will need to be a strong leader, with solid visioning and implementation skills. Strong interpersonal skills and good administrative skills are also necessary.

If you know of someone that you believe would be right for this position, please either let us know or share the job posting with that person. While no one can replace Betsy, the Board assures the membership that PESC is committed to the work that she began, building electronic standards that benefit the higher education community and the students.

Sincerely,

Keith Riccitelli
Chair, PESC
ED’s modernization efforts face leadership changes

The driving force behind the Department of Education’s modernization efforts will soon be stepping down.

Greg Woods, Chief Operating Officer of ED’s Office of Federal Student Aid (FSA) announced last month that he will be resigning from his post effective Sept. 30.

Woods said that he is resigning to focus his energies on overcoming pancreatic cancer, a disease he was diagnosed with earlier this year. Chief of Staff Candy Kane will serve as the acting chief operating officer until the administration can hire a permanent replacement.

FSA, the official name of the Congressional-created Performance Based Organization, was formed during the 1998 reauthorization of the Higher Education Act to tackle the task of modernizing the delivery of federal financial aid.

Woods, who has been the only leader FSA has known, was called a “passionate champion for students and access to post-secondary education,” by Secretary of Education Rod Paige.

“He has forged a new partnership with the higher education and financial communities to improve the delivery of federal student aid to more than 8 million students attending our nation’s colleges, universities and postsecondary schools,” said Paige.

Under Woods’ leadership, FSA has achieved high customer satisfaction ratings, structured its offices into three channels representing schools, students and financial partners, and begun the long, complicated process of computer system integration.

“Greg’s departure is both sad, as he is a very visionary person, and unfortunate, given the momentum that he has started with the PBO,” said Ellen Frishberg, director of student financial services at Johns Hopkins University.

In addition to the structural overhaul of the office and the modernization efforts mandated by Congress, Woods tenure has seen the successful launch of e-signatures, an increasing popularity in online FAFSA applications, and continued support among all members of the financial aid community for interoperable data transfer of student loan information.

“Through technology innovation and better communication, the student aid community’s relationship with the student aid delivery side of the Department of Education has been changed immeasurably, for the better,” said Frishberg.

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While the federal financial aid community generally holds Woods in high regard, his reign has not been without controversy.

Many in the community feared that because of his close ties with former Vice President Al Gore, he would bring a political edge to what was designed to be a non-political post. However, after nearly four years, Woods has shown that despite his political ties he was there to do a job, and do it well.

Although he was forced to operate in a student loan community heavily divided between Direct Loan and FFEL program members, Woods has managed to pull the community together in his modernization efforts and was often on the program of FFEL-sponsored conferences as a champion of one large federal aid community as opposed to two smaller factions.

“Greg Woods is an energetic articulate manager who cares about students and who solicits and accepts input, including criticism, from all the partners on whom the Performance Based Organization depends to manage the student aid programs,” said Pat Smith, a higher education consultant.

Beyond his personal achievements at the PBO, Woods has been credited for bringing in and retaining some of the best personnel in the business.

“Greg has built a great staff, who work well together—I hope the next COO of the PBO retains all of them, and that perhaps one of them becomes the next COO,” said Smith.

More Changes

While no permanent replacement has yet been named by ED, the “great staff” that many in the community hoped would lead FSA through the transition was weakened soon after Woods’ resignation.

John Reeves, manager of the Financial Partners channel at the Office of Federal Student Aid, announced May 28 that he too would be leaving FSA.

In a letter addressed to several members of the financial community, Reeves, who joined FSA in Fall of 2000, said he “never intended to stay very long” but wanted to ensure that he accomplished a few things during his tenure.

Reeves listed among those accomplishments serving as an internal advocate for the FFEL community while building trust in a divided student loan community. Reeves said he wanted to “build that trust through deeds, not words, by being responsive to the community’s needs and by partnering on such things as electronic signatures, guarantor and lender streamlined electronic payment processes, the data mart, the financial partners portal, a more constructive oversight approach, fewer redundant reviews and a new NSLDS architecture.”

While it is unfortunate that his departure is coming on the heals of Greg Woods’ recent resignation, Reeves said that his decision was made long before Woods’ illness was discovered.

“I’ve done what I reasonably could and stayed several months longer than I intended. It’s time to leave,” said Reeves. Reeves has since joined College Funding Services, Inc. to assist with industry and government relations.

In the case of Reeves, ED has been fortunate enough to find a replacement in short order. Less than a month after Reeves’ departure, Deputy Secretary of Education Bill Hansen announced the appointment of Kristie Hansen, no relation to the Deputy Secretary, to the post.

Hansen, currently Executive Vice President at the National Council of Higher Education Loan Programs will begin her work at FSA July 1.
Community works with ED on release of partner’s portal

On June 10, PESC Executive Director Betsy Bainbridge participated in a Department of Education sponsored focus group for the upcoming Release II of the Financial Partners portal. Bainbridge was joined by lender, guarantor agency and education organization representatives from across the community.

The financial partners portal, which officially went online in late April, is expected to undergo revisions based on community feedback and suggestions in time for a Sept. 30 Release II launch.

Currently, the portal allows for search capabilities that the community has indicated are not satisfactory. Members expressed a desire for the portal to allow users to search on regulations and administrative guidance specifically, although they commented that a link to the Department of Education’s website, which allows this type of search, would be satisfactory. Members also requested a link to a Web-based search engine so that the portal could double as a “business resource center” and that state names be added to the FFEL schools’ search function, according to notes from the meeting.

Another area of the portal that drew much attention was the loan and grant resources area. Johan Bos-Beijer, the portal’s leader at FSA, agreed with participants complaints that this section of the portal “was too long and not organized logically,” according to notes from the meeting.

The focus group suggested splitting the page into two pages one for loan resources and one for grant resources; removing titles from the page; adding a mouse-over feature for descriptions; and pointing the user to the resources website if additional information is desired.

In addition, Bos-Beijer mentioned forming an external Content Management Advisory Board, made up of the external business partners, that would have “deliberative and advisory responsibilities for external content that would be posted on the page,” according to the notes. An email link at the bottom of the page allowing users to suggest additions was also proposed.

In addition, focus group participants suggested minor changes to the home and publications page, the removal of the “counseling resources” page, and more consistent document formatting.

Once the community’s suggestions were heard and discussed, Bos-Beijer explained the new requirements they would be seeing after the second release. These included: Adding state contacts to the contact resources page and links to other channel’s organization charts.

Finally, Bos-Beijer told participants that in the portal’s third release ED planned to allow users to register for multiple systems at one time, as well as allow a single sign-on for multiple systems.

Additional information about the upcoming release may be found at www.fp.ed.gov.

"The nice thing about standards is that there are so many to choose from." —Dr. Gridlock
PESC Board embarks on executive search

PESC's Board of Directors invites applications for the position of executive director, to be filled in September, 2002, or as soon thereafter as possible. Betsy Bainbridge who has held this position since the inception of the organization, has submitted her resignation effective Dec. 15. Bainbridge will participate in the search and selection.

"If we're successful in finding the right person to begin in September, we'll have three full months of overlap in which to transfer an understanding of PESC's culture and history, plans for the future, and member needs," said Bainbridge.

The search began June 5 with the following advertisement in industry publications, the ASAE job board, and The Chronicle of Higher Education:

The PESC Executive Director, reporting to the Board of Directors, serves as the chief executive officer, carrying out the decisions of the Board; managing projects, budgets, and staff; coordinating the work of volunteers; promoting PESC and electronic standards in higher education; and providing strategic advice to the Board. The ideal candidate will have experience coordinating collaborative activities; writing and public speaking; senior management of a non-profit or for-profit organization; and 5 or more years working in higher education. An entrepreneurial perspective and a technical background is desirable. The position requires 5 to 10 percent travel and a Washington, D.C. presence. Compensation is competitive and dependent on experience and qualifications.

Applicants should send a letter of interest, resume, and contact information for three professional references by email to Sarah Johansson at sjohansson@oba.uic.edu or by fax to 312.413.1972.

X12 trimester meeting focuses on XML

PESC representative Betsy Bainbridge attended the X12 trimester meeting in Minneapolis in early June, gathering information on the progress of X12 in establishing its role as an XML standards-setting organization. Betsy reports that X12 is making great strides in that direction, having published a full draft of design guidelines and proposing procedures for the development and maintenance of X12 XML business document standards. These standards are identified as templates, modules, assemblies, blocks and components. Betsy indicates that the XML Forum may want to submit its work on core components and schema development at the next X12 trimester meeting in October.

Another issue of interest to meeting attendees was an X12 intellectual property rights policy. A draft was presented to the X12 Steering Committee for comment. This draft attempts to balance the authority of an organization to retain rights to its work with X12’s right to ownership of the output of a collaboration carried out under its auspices.

Subcommittee A Education Administration accepted nominations for officers in preparation for elections in October. Jerry Bracken, representing PESC, was nominated for the Chair position; Barbara Andrepont (NCES) was nominated for Vice Chair; and Rick Skeel (AACRAO) for Procedures Review Board representative.
Technology Tidbits and Standard Snippets

- To help website architects, designers, developers and owners harness the power of interoperable browsers and websites, the Web Standards Project (WaSP) recently relaunched with a developer education and standards compliance in authoring tools and browsers focus. Among its first initiatives, WaSP created a Dreamweaver Task Force. The relaunched site is available at www.webstandards.org and includes information about the task force and the group’s work toward Web standards.

- Great Lakes Higher Education Loan Corporation recently announced the availability of FASTAwards, which allows schools to present financial aid awards to students electronically via the Internet. The 24 hours a day, 7 day a week award information site will be accessed via a link on the school’s website. The award page provides schools the opportunity to include custom messages, such as informing students that certain documents are missing or links to online entrance counseling. In addition, an online MPN with e-signature capabilities is also available at the request of the school.

- The Meteor project, which began soliciting proposals for a new home earlier this year, has not yet decided what entity will be awarded the project. A meeting of the review team being led by Mark Valenti is being held on June 18.

- The 64-institution State University of New York has entered into an agreement with SCT that will encourage further migration by those campuses currently not using SCT software platforms to SCT products. Thirty SUNY institutions currently use SCT Banner software and increased standardization is a system priority.

- More than 5.6 million FAFSAs have been processed for the 2002-2003 academic year. According to the Department of Education, combined electronic and paper filings are approximately 503,000 ahead of this time last year. As of May 5, more than 2.7 million FAFSA renewals and applications had been submitted electronically, with an addition 1.5 million corrections submitted.

The UT Austin EDI Server broke records in May

- 47,222 TS130 transcripts, up 11,408 over last May
- 34,243 TS131 acknowledgments
- 3,449 TS146 Requests
- 4,196 TS997 functional acknowledgments
- 14,732 TS189 admission applications, up 2,294 from last May
- 1,535 TS138 test score reports
- 106,130 total transactions
- 120 entities sent transcripts (plus about 300 Florida schools not counted as separate entities)—second highest ever
- 188 entities received transcripts (plus about 300 Florida schools not counted as separate entities)—highest ever
According to an article in The Chronicle of Higher Education, a new service in British Columbia permits electronic transfer of student transcripts, which is essential in a province that allows students to take courses at any number of its 27 postsecondary institutions. The $91,000 system, which uses X12 EDI standards, is expected to pay for itself in postage alone, as well as speed up the processing of applications to British Columbia’s postsecondary institutions. Initially, seven institutions will participate, with most of the rest expected to join later this year, according to the article.

The Department of Education recently announced the release of the first step in the new lender reporting process that is set to replace existing Form 799. The Lender Application Process (LAP) went live the first weekend in June. The LAP application and information related to the lender redesign project are available at www.fp.ed.gov.

Citibank has announced that they will allow students to use e-signatures for the CitiAssist online loan program. CitiAssist is Citibank’s private education loan product that offers competitive rates, online account access, no loan fees, and flexible repayment options. Students can apply online for their Stafford, PLUS and CitiAssist loans at www.studentloan.com.

The National Student Loan Data System now allows users to enter and receive exit counseling by SSN reports for up to 50 borrowers at one time. Previously this report allowed entry for only six students. In addition, NSLDS now allows the exit counseling report to be run for any date range as opposed to the previous 60-day only date range.

The New Hampshire Higher Education Loan Corporation recently announced the availability of an e-signature enabled Stafford loan application process. NHHELC’s e-signature capabilities will use the Department of Education’s PIN for authentication.

The Department of Education recently published notice of a new system of records titled, Student Loan Repayment Benefits Case Files. The system was developed to administer a new program aimed at enabling ED to provide for the repayment of federally insured student loans on behalf of its employees. The Department of Education seeks comments on the system in accordance with requirements of the Privacy Act. Comments should be directed to Jeffrey Frank through comments@ed.gov on or before June 28.

Membership Update

There are two important announcements concerning membership this month. First, just a friendly reminder that membership fees are due to PESC by July 1. Please make every effort to submit payment by this date or contact Betsy Bainbridge at 202-293-7383 with your intentions to make payment.

Second, please make sure that you’ve marked Oct. 22 to 23 for a day and a half of information-packed PESC meetings in Spokane, Washington. On Tuesday, Oct. 22, the XML Forum will host a full day of meetings and continue into Wednesday morning. The remainder of Wednesday morning PESC will hold an official member meeting to provide the membership with a full update and report on current activities. Both the Board of Directors and the XML Forum Steering Committee will meet on that Monday, too.

These meetings are being held at the WestCoast Grand Hotel in conjunction with the EDI in Education Conference (see aacrao.org) all at the same hotel beginning October 20th. The hotel room rate for both events is $89 (single/double) per night. Please contact the hotel directly at 800.325.4000 to make reservations and use the PESC group name.