The Student Information System Dilemma
When FUD meets fatigue, the whole industry suffers.

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As a CIO who likes to live on the innovative side of life, I am always looking to see which vendors are riding a wave of innovation. In the last 12 months I have endured numerous webinars and sales pitches and have taken calls from Salesforce, Workday, Unit4, Campus Management, and Oracle. Much like other CIOs, I could barely make it through 10 minutes of the talk, hype, blab, and desperation by each of these vendors selling transaction systems presented as "innovative breakthroughs." More on the patronizing side are the CRM vendors trying to pretend they are actually "student success" or student information systems. After a year of listening to at least 10 sessions, I stepped back and thought, "I have never seen so much FUD (fear, uncertainty, and doubt) being spread around by reputable companies. Surely they must think that all CIOs are confused, fatigued, or just plain lame."

As a technologist who has worked on seven ERP systems in higher education, manufacturing, finance, legal, and high tech, it has become unbearable to listen to the misinformation, false promises, and pure hype to bring outdated legacy code within transaction systems to the forefront of a changing digital world. Most of these companies are passing out their own FUD, as they try to play in an uncertain marketplace that is very difficult to sell into. As a CIO who knows hundreds of other higher education CIOs, it is plain to see that we are far from lamebrains or confused. However, it is completely accurate to say we are fatigued by the repetitive plays by SIS/CRM companies who are passing their own FUD amongst the industry. The tipping point of wrong decision-making is at its highest when FUD meets fatigue.

As I reflect over the past 18 months on a campus that evaluated the options of getting off the Banner SIS system, each competitor passed the FUD factor exam with an A+. Each company, including the incumbent, helped create a campus confusion factor that hindered any vendor's chance of replacing Banner. The CRM vendor even put their FUD factor on steroids and caused campus-wide confusion on what they could—or could not—deliver. The unwinding of the FUD in the last 18 months has prompted my own reaching out to other CIOs who agreed it was time to spill the beans and say, "Enough confusion." As CIOs, we are called to get into the digital era and lead revenue-generation efforts on campuses. We no longer have the time to be worn down by FUD peddlers. I have agreed to write the first article to get FUD out of the industry and am willing to go on record and give specific examples. Just as a physician, through the Hippocratic Oath, pledges to be honest with patients even when the news is unpleasant, someone must bring honesty to the SIS industry to start removal of the FUD factor.

Salesforce. I sat through a Salesforce-sponsored webinar intended to convince campus leaders that Salesforce's HEDA—Higher Education Data Architecture—is an innovative breakthrough. As suspected, within 15 minutes it was the age-old ploy of "We are developing a framework and everyone will benefit from it." Any CIO worth his or her salt could easily see the reality that Salesforce is a tremendous

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CRM solution, but years away from having any substance for an SIS system. A framework with a piggy-back architecture that still requires all its data from an SIS system is double trouble for colleges and universities. In full disclosure, we are very pleased with Salesforce as a CRM solution yet still need all the Banner Enrollment data to actually make it useful. As a CIO responsible for cost savings, offsets, and cost avoidance, it is clear to me that there are few of these benefits remaining when the new system still requires the old system.

Workday. I listened to Workday and almost bought into the concept of "new and fresh" alongside a great five-year total cost of ownership. However, on a cursory search of the Internet, I found that just putting in the HR and Finance piece was taking longer than any ERP system I have had to install in the past. If two modules take the same 9–12-month period that it used to take an entire SIS system, something else must be in play. This made me do a deeper and more creative search for faculty senate meeting notes from certain universities, and I found public documents that would cause concern for any CIO. When state auditors are being called into major university system implementations, the job of the CIO is at risk. I would still need the Banner system to make a seamless environment work for the next two years.

Unit4. I listened to Unit4 and took note of the special chatbot features and cool innovative things. However, I could never get a straight answer on what parts of Banner they could replace. Even after inquiring on exactly what modules this new and improved Three Rivers Systems company offers, I never received that. At the end of the cycle, I was knowledgeable enough to know that I would still have the Banner system.

Oracle in the Cloud. Simply put, anytime you are being offered a free system, buyer beware.

Campus Management. I received two calls and two "I will be in Tulsa and want to visit" messages, but no follow-through after a regional sales management change.

Ellucian. It has taken all my extra energy to defend the decision that Banner is no better nor worse than the other options. Ellucian has continued to dominate in the space and has earned the right to have pieces of their system remain on a campus should almost any other system be chosen. However, Ellucian has put me in a very awkward position as a CIO. Anytime a CIO has to rally support, stand in defense, and vehemently stand against users who want "new and improved" because they cannot see it, feel it, or taste "fresh and new," it is unhealthy. It is very possible that I will rally the nay-sayers when we get to Banner 9 and take advantage of the 18 new and improved features. I truly hope it delivers, and that my job as an innovative CIO will be less consumed by something that should stand on its own.

Summary: In fairness to the companies mentioned in this article, I have kindly shared these very thoughts verbally to the sales people who would listen. I, along with many other CIOs, am truly fatigued; and casting FUD up against fatigue is an insult to the intelligence of higher education.

Due to all the FUD, fatigue, and the desire of this CIO to not risk trying to defend the wrong solution, we decided we needed a research and advisory expert before we started this entire process 18 months ago. We chose world leader The Tambellini Group, who is system agnostic, has 19 years of SIS research data, and speaks kindly and fairly of all vendors. We value this balance and validity when making multi-million-dollar decisions that may cost the CIO his or her reputation and job.

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of The Tambellini Group. To express your views in this forum, please contact Mary McDaniel, Chief Marketing Officer, The Tambellini Group, at mary.mcdaniel@thetambellinigroup.com.

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