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UF Foundation and NERDC ADVANCE Together

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Table of Contents

UF Foundation and NERDC ADVANCE Together ............................................................... 3
Fund-raising at a large institution is a gargantuan task, as enormous amounts of data must be juggled regularly. The University of Florida Foundation (UFF), which raises funds for UF, has to keep current a mailing list of 260,000 names, as well as track donations, alumni biographical information, foundation membership, and other data.

The Foundation uses ADVANCE, a program that runs in the Customer Information Control System (CICS) DB2 environment at NERDC, to help manage this task.

The Foundation processes and tracks 90,000 gifts a year, according to Ron Bailey, UFF's director of computer services, and ADVANCE allows UFF to build a history of each gift giver.

"We're trying to get a total picture of giving. We want to know exactly what they give to the university. When you're working through a campaign, you need to know if there are other individuals working with them. We wouldn't want three development officers asking for gifts of the same person. We need a coordinated effort," says Bailey.

That coordination comes in with ADVANCE, which the Foundation has been using at NERDC since May 1993. According to Richard Marquis, DB2 coordinator at NERDC, the ADVANCE program performs tasks the Foundation previously used three separate applications to accomplish.

At first, however, there was a problem, Marquis said: "ADVANCE was too general." He said the program took an incredibly long time for routine tasks. Marquis and his staff monitored the program as the Foundation used it to determine how they could cut processing time.

It took quite a bit of research. But two weeks of study and analysis later, Marquis was able to suggest a few changes to Bailey.

Bailey carried out the suggested solution, and in about a day, the ADVANCE program was
"flying" compared to before. "We changed one thing and eighty percent of the problems went away," Marquis said.

The end result was a savings of about $10,000 a month in computer costs, says Marquis, and UFF continues to save in other ways, particularly when it comes to access.

Running ADVANCE at NERDC makes it easily accessible. Authorized users of the ADVANCE program can instantly tap into it from the NERDC Interactive Services menu (TPX) from any networked workstation, whether it's a computer linked to the campus network, or a home computer linked using a modem.

"NERDC has good connectivity to campus, all over the state, all over the U.S. Whether you're in Gainesville on campus or in Tallahassee, you have access to the ADVANCE system," says Marquis.

Bailey agrees that easy access to the program is important. "We know we need to keep it on the mainframe for backups, (and for) uptime, so that everyone at the university can access it. We have Foundation staff at different colleges all around campus," Bailey said, adding that some staffers work outside of Gainesville.

A big advantage of running the program at NERDC is the DB2 support teams at the data center. The teams help the Foundation by testing updates, tweaking programs to save valuable on-line time, and constant knowledgeable support.

"We keep the hardware running reliably and thus the folks at UFF don't have to be concerned with that. They do not have to be experts in computer hardware and operating systems; they can do what they do best, which is the application," says Ron Schoenau, director of NERDC.

NERDC is currently helping UFF upgrade its DB2 program, to take advantage of software written to run faster, and to make troubleshooting down the road easier.

While UFF wants to use the most up-to-date software, all new programs should first go through a "quarantine" period in the "test region." In the parallel test environment that NERDC offers, the program is isolated from other programs while the bugs are worked out and the program becomes "tried and true." After passing the test environment, programs are moved into the production region, which is what the end users see as their current live or "real" data.

NERDC and the Foundation scheduled a late October transition to the production version of DB2 version 4.1, following a successful trial in the test region. Both Bailey and Marquis said the test region transition was smooth and without any interruption of services. "We (Kathy Davies, coordinator of computer systems, and I) really made that upgrade seem seamless," Marquis said. "Many customers are not aware that we maintain a complete parallel system to do all this testing, so current work is not affected. We are very proud of the minimal amount of downtime our system has. We like to be there for the Foundation."

Your Comments are Welcome

We welcome your comments and suggestions on this and all UFIT documentation. Please send your comments to:

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