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FACTS Expands Student Services into Web-world

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FACTS Expands Student Services into Web-world

Cooperation among Florida's universities and community colleges has created a Web-based, one-stop shopping venue for student services.

Thanks to agreement among the architects of FACTS (Florida Academic Counseling and Tracking for Students), students and future students, and/or their parents will be able to gain access to degree tracking, financial aid, admissions, and more, all via the World Wide Web.

The project is designed to provide an infrastructure for delivering academic advisement services within and across the 28 schools in the Florida Community College System and the 10 schools in the State University System, said Barbara Talmadge, University Registrar.

This new system will eventually allow students enrolled in distance education courses at any of the 38 institutions to have access to all of the student services without ever having to set foot on campus.

Gaining consensus on how the new state-mandated system would function was vital to the project's success. It links the institutions through a Web-based infrastructure.

"The reason we made progress on this is that we are not mandating any degree audit system. We're not mandating any style of transcript, 'we' being those involved in the state system we're interfacing institutions with. This gave us a huge headstart. That is the key to how we managed to get as far as we have," Talmadge said.

Earl Robbins, Associate University Registrar, added: "This means that schools can use the systems that they have already developed; they do not have to rewrite their online applications to fit the statewide system."

Here's how FACTS will work: There's a central site computer, which will be housed at NERDC. The central site computer will run both the software, called EAGLE (Enhanced Application Generating Language for the Enterprise), and the Web server. The Web server currently runs on the NERSP computer at NERDC. Then, each of the 38 schools will have a computer that "talks" to the central site computer.

"The centralized part where the student goes first is here at NERDC. From there, they will press a button (on a Web page) and our central site software will decide what to do next and where to go," Robbins said.

The central-site software, which is really the 'brains' of the project, was written by Robbins and Alan Cook, coordinator of computer applications for the Office of the University Registrar (O.U.R.). EAGLE builds CICS-generated Web pages without going through a 'middle man' of software (or 'middleware'). Commercial software used previously by UF to run ISIS (Integrated Student Information System) used 'middleware' and that tended to slow down the response time.

"All the pages are generated on the mainframe using CICS programs. What I really love about this is that our 'weak link' is a mainframe. It's our smallest computer and we're happy about that. There's nothing to launder it through. It's all generated and sent straight to the Web server out to a browser. In CICS we basically get subsecond response," Robbins said.
Barry Brooks, NERDC's CICS systems coordinator, agrees that CICS was more than capable of handling the load. "The volume we put through CICS was impressive. We're real pleased. A lot of people have done a lot of work to make it come together," he said.

Another major component of FACTS is the software that keeps students from accessing someone else's records and also remembers "where" in the system each student is.

"The Web is known as a stateless environment. You click your button and it goes to some computer and you're separated from everything. It's just your browser on your computer. That doesn't work very well when you're trying to keep track of someone and what they're doing, where they're going next and what they did last. So, Alan Cook has written what we call a 'state engine.' It runs in CICS and keeps track of all this stuff. It's the security piece of the central site software that does the time-outs, PIN verification--all the things we need to keep track of this huge, huge project," Robbins said.

"For instance, during UF's registration this time, there were at any given time between 700 and 800 people using the system. And this thing has to keep them separate so they don't get each other's records. The Web does not do that naturally," Robbins continued.

FACTS involves all functions of student services: financial aid, degree tracking, degree shopping, admissions, registration, master course lists of distance education offerings, and bursar's services, Talmadge said.

Participants in this mammoth undertaking come from cities crisscrossing Florida. The University of South Florida in Tampa houses the Florida Center for Academic Advising and Support (FCAAS), which is the office that will be responsible for approving the overall system design, project oversight, budget preparation, and establishing policies and priorities. There are also various committees that tackle different sections of this project, ranging from technical to content issues. Every school involved in the project has a team that's working on this project.

Here at UF, teams of professionals in both the O.U.R. and at NERDC are working to make this cooperative dream a reality. On NERDC's end, the project coordinator is Barb Sedesse, NERDC systems programmer.

Sedesse said, "In order for this project to be successful, everyone involved must work for the common good of the project. Acting as a liaison surely does not mean that I do all the work at NERDC, but I do have the opportunity to interact with all of the areas involved so our staff knows where we're going with the project. This project involves staff from NERDC's CICS, DB2, Network Services, and NERSP groups, who have already put a lot of hard work into it."

The expected completion date for FACTS is October 1999, although the infrastructure that will serve the system was in place at the end of September 1998, Robbins said.

The first project phase includes academic advising. Phase two will probably include delivering financial aid information.

The team working here at UF is ready, thanks to ISIS.

"ISIS provided the environment this past semester to be able to prototype many of the functions of the statewide system. The function we were urged and encouraged by President Lombardi and Provost Capaldi to provide is the same set of integrated services that the statewide system is supposed to provide," Talmadge said.
Since ISIS was already in place here at UF, current students will not see great changes. "What it will do for potential UF students is a big piece of the puzzle," Robbins said.

"It will provide them the capability of degree shopping at other institutions. From our perspective, I think what's more important is that it will provide our services to prospective students," Talmadge continued. She said that the customer base for this system includes "everybody from middle school on up, and their parents."

UF students won't be left out, though.

Robbins said, "Another thing it will do for UF students is to facilitate distance learning. As the distance learning aspect improves and more information is out there, then distance-learning students will be able to come in to the Web page, apply, take a course on the Web, and get their grade. They could do all that without ever setting foot on this campus or even making a phone call. Those kinds of services will be there, but they are not there today. 'It's a major benefit especially to the nontraditional students. As Dr. Lawrence Abele, provost of Florida State University, told us 'We're lifting up the entire state. We're providing educational opportunities that people have not had before and those are directly translatable into better jobs and better education. It's a general lifting of society.' I love that aspect."

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