



Interview: Dr. William Fritz, Senior Associate Vice Provost at Georgia State University

Project leaders of any institution's ERP implementation process face a number of challenges that require engaging leadership, creative problem solving, and good old-fashioned footwork. In this interview, Dr. William Fritz of Georgia State University discusses how he addressed the complexities and people problems he faced as the project leader of the university's student ERP implementation during 2002-2003.

One of the difficult challenges in a complex systems implementation is communication. How did you communicate project issues to the campus?

I can answer this question in two words: Shoe leather! I probably wore out two pairs of shoes walking around campus – and we are an urban campus with a fairly small footprint. Basically, I went around campus talking to every person I could individually or in groups and meetings.

This was an important new student system implementation. How did you engage and involve the deans?

I met with them individually on many occasions and also brought issues to our bi-weekly deans group meeting with the Provost. It was important to us to keep the deans engaged and they appreciated being kept in the loop.

How did you engage and involve the faculty?

I worked hard with the faculty senate, which is an important body on our campus. Again, most of my work involved one-on-one communication with senate leaders rather than formal meetings. I also appointed the chair of the faculty committee on admissions and standards as a faculty team leader. I worked out an agreement with him that any issues coming out of the implementation team that touched on senate policy would automatically go to his committee and possibly the full senate for action. This way the team could not be accused of changing policy without working through the proper channels.

What were some of the other "non-technical" or cultural issues you faced in your student implementation?

We faced a number of people and cultural issues at the beginning of our student implementation. For one thing, the campus did not have a history of leadership development and our directors had not been trained to "own" a project and lead by example. Another issue I faced was enterprise-wide teamwork or rather the lack of it. Our campus was "siloed" and there were not good or established channels of communication. Team leaders were not used to being responsible for cross-campus and cross-department communication.

Tell me more about the leadership concerns you mentioned.

My concerns were that we had never taken the time to develop leaders and we were asking them to take on a major role in institutional change without the skills necessary for success.

What did you do to face these issues?

We did two main things in facing our leadership challenges. One was to provide leadership training and leadership retreats using an outside consultant. The second thing we did was to tell the leaders what was in it for them if they succeeded.

What was the outcome?

Over the course of the project, there were many opportunities for advancement. Those who succeeded were promoted into positions of increasing responsibility. Many of the team members used the skills taught in the workshops and retreats to implement sustainable institutional change.

Earlier you mentioned "silo" effects at the university. Was this a problem for the project?

Our university was extremely "siloed." Colleges did not talk to one another. Student services and enrollment services did not communicate. Even within enrollment services, financial aid and student accounts did not communicate well.

How did you overcome this problem?

By articulating and living the principle that "everyone has a seat at the table." This meant that teams were designed to be cross-functional in composition and thus included members from different silos. This approach forced the members to work together and realize that they shared many of the same goals. In the end, the big surprise was how well the teams worked.

Did you face any other cultural problems you had to overcome?

The campus itself was in serious need of a cultural change. The old systems were designed to be "staff friendly" with less regard to usability by students and faculty. Our goal was to use this implementation as an opportunity to reorder things to be "students first, faculty second, and staff third."

University staff members often have to do more work in an enterprise system to support their customers, much as the flight crew of an airline does more work than the passengers. In a university, students are on campus to learn, faculty are there to teach and create new knowledge through their creative activities, and the role of staff is to support this teaching-learning environment. I like to think that this implementation went a long way in creating a new customer service spirit in our staff members here at Georgia State.

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