

## End the Paper(less) Chase

By Sara Stroud, Campus Technology

SIX YEARS AGO, if you had walked through the Northeastern University (MA) admissions department in December, you would have seen something approximating chaos.

The Boston private university was seeing a tremendous spike in applications. To manage them, the school was using part-time workers and expanding into makeshift office space. Conditions were cramped. Budgets and staff morale were strained, recalls Pamela Brennan, senior associate director of operations for undergraduate admissions.

"We were doing it," Brennan says of processing student applications. "But we knew it could be better. We were managing to get decisions out, but we couldn't get our heads around what the applicant pool looked like."

In 2004, looking for a comprehensive solution to its admissions needs, Northeastern decided to outsource its document imaging and management. Now, instead of arriving at the campus, applications are sent directly to an offsite production center, run by document imaging and web-hosted document-management firm DataBank IMX. There, documents are sorted, scanned, and indexed before being uploaded for processing by partner company FolderWave, which provides Software as a Service (SaaS) document management for college and university admissions departments. DataBank handles the actual paper documents coming in from applicants, records and indexes them into digital files, and then uploads them to be processed by FolderWave's software, which is what the university staff interacts with via the web. FolderWave also serves as a workflow system for the admissions staff.

The result: Northeastern's admissions department has become a very different place. The department no longer needs to rely on part-time processors, and morale is greatly improved. In December, at the height of the application season, "if you walked into the admissions office, you'd never believe we're in the throes of our busiest cycle," Brennan enthuses.

The faster processing time also has given admissions staff a clearer picture of what the overall applicant pool looks like, which allows them to make better decisions for the university, she adds.

Northeastern isn't alone in its move toward a hosted document-management solution. Traditionally, most schools have opted to purchase document-management software, but a growing number of colleges and universities are turning to hosted and SaaS solutions, says Dan Dillon, marketing manager for Perceptive Software, whose ImageNow document-imaging, management, and workflow software is used by more than 400 colleges and universities.

To help manage the barrage of paper and electronic documents associated with moving students into and through the higher education system, universities are looking to firms providing various outsourcing options for document imaging and management. Such companies offer a buffet of choices, from taking on the entire process of processing and storing documents on their own servers, to tackling key pieces of the document-imaging and management puzzle. Solutions such as DataBank and ImageNow integrate with student information systems, allowing users to access documents through their existing software. And each offers a range of options based on how much schools want to outsource their document-imaging and management needs.

### Starting With Admissions

The admissions department often is the first place where universities look to implement document-imaging and management solutions. For good reason: In 2008, for the third year in a row, about three-quarters of US colleges and universities reported that they had seen an increase in applications for admission, according to the National Association for College Admission Counseling. While most students apply online, many of the supporting documents, such as transcripts and letters of recommendation, continue to be on paper, and schools need a way to integrate all those documents for review by admissions counselors.

St. John's University, a 20,000-student university in New York City, started using DataBank IMX about three years ago in its admissions department.

"We, like many schools, were undergoing a significant increase in undergraduate applications," St. John's Associate Vice President of IT Maura Woods states. In a five-year period, the number of undergraduate applications had climbed from about 15,000 per year to about 25,000.

Using paper files with a folder for each student was cumbersome, and documents sometimes were misfiled or misplaced. The school had been using SunGard Higher Education's Banner solutions for more than a decade, and initially was looking to establish an in-house system for processing documents via the Banner Xtender document-imaging module. After calling in DataBank as a consultant to develop the in-house system, St. John's instead decided that it might be more efficient to outsource its document imaging altogether.

"It was more than we were willing to take on," Woods says of the prospect of processing all the department's incoming documents.

Now, mail for St. John's admissions department goes to a post office box established by DataBank, which also fields