

Delivering Online Financial Reports for Muggles and Wizards

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Abstract

Your institution has taken the leap and joined the treadmill of enterprise financial applications, complete with regular upgrades and maintenance. The campus is sold on the enhanced capabilities, web access, increased performance, availability of data, transparency and a departure from the old fashion, paper driven, slow moving ways of old. Your enterprise application is a doorway to the future but wait – how will it handle reporting?

Every institution using an enterprise financial application struggles with reporting and how best to supply campus with reports or reporting capabilities. Either via purchased software reporting tools or customized reporting solutions, how can this critical part of any implementation and subsequent upgrades be addressed by your institution?

*One of the benefits of enterprise financial systems is access – access to a huge user base and access via the web or an institution's internal network. This increased access affords a wider range of users, as varied as **Harry Potter's wizards and muggles**.*

*The delivery of the new financial application allows the **wizards** to fly through screens and workflow, journals, vouchers, bank transfers and encumbrances. The **muggles** are apprehensive and ask, where are my old reports and why do I have to become a query master?*

The push behind implementing or upgrading a financial application puts enormous strain and pressure on any organization. The reporting component is easily overlooked or underestimated, yet, may be the single greatest satisfaction factor. No matter how quickly the system performs, how inclusive the system may be, how many processes are improved or how many errors are eliminated, if campus is not able to see meaningful reports, the system is automatically labeled, “not-user friendly”. As the implementation deadline grows closer and unexpected challenges eat into the project timeline, frequently the component that suffers is reporting. The result is a successfully running application with insufficient reporting and a campus that is quick to point a finger at an application perceived as of lesser value than its predecessor.

Introduction of the Organization

North Carolina State University, located in Raleigh, NC opened in 1887, founded as the land-grant institution for the citizens of North Carolina. It currently serves a student population of over 30,000 with a faculty of approximately 2,000. With an annual budget in excess of one billion dollars, NC State is classified by the Carnegie Foundation as a RU/VH (very high research activity) institution with over \$286 million in research funding and consistently ranks a national best value and among the nation's top 40 public universities.

Serving NC State in its instruction, research and extension mission, is a comprehensive administrative systems infrastructure, supporting over 200 administrative applications, including the Oracle PeopleSoft Enterprise Applications such as Portal 8.9, Financial Management 8.9, Supplier Relationship Management (Procurement) 8.9, Campus Solutions 8.9, and Human Capital Management 8.9.

The financial system serves approximately 3,000 campus users, controlled by security login via the Oracle PeopleSoft Enterprise Portal known on campus as the MyPack Portal – so named to correspond to the school mascot – the Wolfpack. Accessible via the web, the supporting hardware and environment infrastructure is provided through Enterprise Technology Services and Support. Software development, implementation, and maintenance is managed by Enterprise Application and Database Services.

The campus was introduced to PeopleSoft Financials in a phased implementation approach from October 1998 through July 1999. Subsequent upgrades have included Financials 7.02 in March of 2002, Financials 8.4 in March of 2005 in conjunction with the rollout of the Enterprise Portal 8.8. The most recent financial upgrade introduced to campus was Financials 8.9 in January 2007.

Statement (restatement) of the Problem/Initiative

NC State introduced their first PeopleSoft Financial application (7.01) in 1998 and in response to the looming Y2K deadline and limitations with their legacy system. The initial implementation did not include robust reporting. When first implemented, queries were offered to deliver snippets of information, specific to journals or account activity but limited in scope. Instead of the traditional monthly reports provided with the mainframe application, customers were encouraged to run public queries - a leap in reporting for most users. To ease the transition, the old financial system was maintained as a backup, and continued to provide campus their traditional reports. The new world of queries and customer driven reporting tools was not embraced, instead it was perceived as a lesser, complicated, incomplete reporting capability. Campus did not embrace the new reporting capabilities and had little incentive to do so since their old, familiar, main frame reports continued to be produced and did not require any effort by the customer. Instead of enthusiasm from new and improved reporting capabilities, the financial system held the stigma of a complex, unfriendly, and inferior reporting tool.

Gaining customer confidence and support for reporting from the enterprise financial application took a new focus and emphasis in order to undo the negativity and mistrust from the initial implementation.

Exhibiting a commitment to satisfy customers, the first step was determining an appropriate reporting tool that was in fact – better than what already existed. There were plenty of complaints from customers to start an evaluation process, and listening to customer's concerns served to identify key components in our reporting solution. The new financial application in place served a greater audience than ever before and understanding the needs and expectations of this new audience was the first step in recommending a reporting solution. Zeroing in on what our customers wanted was critical towards designing a reporting solution.

The reporting solution had to address the wide skill set of an expanded user base. We wanted to continue encouraging and supporting our *wizards* - those users who saw the advantages of customer driven reporting with ad-hoc queries and data mining, limited only by their imaginations. The *muggles* needed more than support – they needed concrete reports that consolidated the most requested information in a way that required minimal system proficiencies. The solution needed to instill confidence in the financial system and validate the institution's investment in enterprise applications. The institution was sold on the idea of an enterprise financial solution and that very solution was under serious attack. Could we persuade the institution the investment wasn't a mistake, it was a work in progress with the last piece (reporting) yet to be fully demonstrated?

Whatever reporting solution was selected needed to include long-term maintenance issues. Committing to an enterprise application meant a commitment to ongoing upgrades - if upgrades resurfaced reporting inefficiencies, there was no tolerance cushion by the campus community. The reporting tool solution had to balance the expectations of our customers, the constraints of budget and resources necessary to maintain it, and the endorsement of high-level management to advocate for its success.

As in retail – rarely does one size fit all. Looking at every institution that has an enterprise financial application, you may not find two reporting solutions that match. At NC State we wanted to find a reporting solution that would please a very broad base, from business managers to administrative assistants, principal investigators on contract and grants to Deans and executive administrators. Over the years since our initial implementation, we've continued to examine our reporting solutions and worked to improve the level of information and ease of use with efficient and effective maintenance support.

Until the release of our Wolfpack Reporting System, one nagging unaddressed component of financial reporting had been a mechanism to marry the expenditures associated with personnel and benefits into the financial system at a level of detail that is traditionally stored in the payroll or labor system. Since personnel expenditures represent the single greatest expense for an institution, reporting detailed payroll expense required a separate, additional, labor and distribution reporting module. For NC State, the detail

resided in the PS Labor module, a bridge reporting system between Human Resources and Financials. How could we marry the detail information stored in PS Labor but display it via a financial reporting application when the security associated with both modules were very different? Our customers were insistent – wave the magic wand and make the two into one!

Design

The design for system reporting tools has been an evolution, reacting to changes in the enterprise software, working to include customer driven enhancements, and managing limited resources. While we were on Financials version 7.02, nVision was selected as the tool to use to replace the reports previously available in the mainframe system.

Tasked with developing a new reporting tool, a Reporting Focus Group led by our University Business Officers determined the course for the new reports using nVision. Since the campus community liked the reports provided through the mainframe, it was decided that the new reports would be rewritten in nVision using the old mainframe reports as our guideline.

Once the nVision reports became available and the campus community accepted them, the old mainframe system was shutdown and campus severed its connection to the old reports. The new reports via nVision became known as the WOLF Reports.

The reporting evolution continued with the upgrade to Financials 8.4. The Fit Gap review process discovered the nVision tool had been changed to the point where this tool

could no longer be used as our reporting system for campus reporting. At the same time, NC State had contracted to have a reporting application specifically created for our Faculty /Principal Investigators called the Faculty Accounting Reports (FAR), written using the PERL language. Even though PERL is not considered a reporting tool, it proved to be a viable solution to create the nVision replacement reports.

Both reporting tools were written using PERL. The Wolf Reports and FAR (Faculty Accounting Reports) were delivered to campus and provided a solution to our wide user base. Although both reports were written in PERL, their design had followed separate tracks, addressing functional expectations from different customer users. Once the reports were delivered, the limitations and inconsistencies between the reports became apparent.

The next evolution in reporting merged the Wolf Reports and FAR and the Wolfpack Reporting System was born. The Wolfpack Reporting System provides a one stop reporting solution for all reporting needs and for all types of users: business managers, administrative assistants, principal investigators, deans, and executive administrators. The users are allowed to configure the reporting menu and to set reporting options when they run their reports.

The Wolfpack Reporting System provides 13 reports and links to other specific reporting applications. The reports available are:

1. Fiscal Year to Date Financial Status

2. Project to Date Financial Status
3. Cash Balance
4. Financial Status
5. Financial Summary Status
6. Summary by Project Phase
7. Summary by Project Segment
8. Project to date Budget Summary
9. Detailed Project Expenditures
10. Detailed Project Encumbrances
11. Detailed Payroll Expenditures
12. Detailed Payroll Encumbrances
13. Three Month Comparison

The menu also includes links to other specific reporting application such as the Position Control Report, Budget Management System, and the Foundation Reports.

The Wolfpack Reporting System is functionally supported by the central administrative offices while technical issues and modifications or enhancements are handled by Enterprise Application and Database Services. Our entire campus community can provide input or send questions by clicking on a link on the Main Menu.

Implementation

The Wolfpack Reporting System (WRS) was released to campus on May 31, 2007. Its delivery via the portal affords the necessary security levels to allow users with appropriate access to run any of the provided reports, drill down capabilities to detail transactions, and data that can be easily exported into Excel.

WRS effectively merged two independent reporting tools. While the programming effort behind the new reporting tool was substantial, the final reporting product had been a work in progress since our initial implementation of PeopleSoft Financials. The new WRS combined the best in prior reporting tools – and this afforded some efficiencies in the implementation. First, our customers were familiar with the old reporting systems. We were able to build WRS by capitalizing on the best components from each reporting system to achieve a comprehensive reporting tool. Second, we tried to incorporate a similar feel, look and navigation to the prior reports. In doing so, we facilitated a smooth transition into WRS, which resulted in user confidence and enthusiasm as they used the new system. Training consisted of presentations to various campus groups and an instructional manual to serve as a reference. Part of the design idea was to create WRS in a way that any *muggle* could easily figure out how to use the reports.

As with any system implementation, the devil is in the details. Documenting expectations from key customers and communicating what the reporting system will deliver is critical. While WRS merged the best from the previous reporting tools, it was necessary to proactively communicate to the University Business Officer and key

stakeholders how the new system would be different. Any design layout changes were preapproved so customers were not surprised (or disappointed) when WRS was demonstrated to campus.

Benefits

The Wolfpack Reporting System has been the most successfully implemented reporting tool for financial information at NC State. It provides all the following in a one-stop shopping environment:

North Carolina State University Wolfpack Reporting System (WRS)

Step 1: Select Report / Link

Reports

- 1 - Fiscal Year-to-Date Financial Status
- 2 - Project-to-Date Financial Status
- 3 - Cash Balance
- 4 - Financial Status
- 5 - Financial Summary Status
- 6 - Summary by Project Phase
- 7 - Summary by Project Segment
- 8 - Project-to-Date Budget Summary
- 9 - Detailed Project Expenditures
- 10 - Detailed Project Encumbrances
- 11 - Detailed Payroll Expenditures
- 12 - Detailed Payroll Encumbrances
- 13 - Three Month Comparison

Links

- [Chartfield Inquiry](#)
- [Report2Web](#)

Step 2: Project ID

Exact Match:

Step 3: Select Period

As of today

Step 4:

[My Preferences](#) [Frequently Asked Questions](#) [C&G Spending Categories](#) [Financial Training](#) [Research Administration](#)
[Message History](#) [Payroll Encumbrance Information](#) [Spending Guidelines](#) [Controller's Office](#) [Contracts and Grants](#)

[Click here to email your questions or suggestions regarding the Wolfpack Reporting System](#)

Reports are selected at the account level (account equals project in WRS) with detail by object code and the drill down capability to journal transactions. Want the same report

for the same time period last year – merely change the time period. Customers can select inception to date information for contract and grant activity or if they prefer, balance sheet activity with accruals and receivables. Should they need more? They can select budget, actuals, encumbrances, available balances and three-month comparative activity for trend analysis. Payroll expenditures and encumbrances by employee are a click away – no longer do our customers have to reconcile payroll reports with financial system expenditures. WRS has links to set up preferences for your most frequent report choices and as our customers insisted - reports can be exported into Excel for easy formatting and distribution.

Now our customers can quickly see how much they spent on travel, if their new computer has been encumbered, confirm all employees are paid from the correct account and make sure they have enough budget to last until June 30. All this in one place and any *muggle* can be as successful as a *master wizard like Dumbledore*.

Beyond the benefits of satisfied customers are the efficiencies achieved in consolidating separate reporting tools that are now merged into the WRS. In the past these reports had to be maintained separately, required additional storage space and dedicated personnel in order to maintain.

Retrospect

The journey has been a learning experience for all and change on campus is frequently met with resistance. The Wolfpack Reporting System has been the culmination of years

of refinements coupled with technology advancements. As our customers grow in their skill levels, we find a higher level of service is expected. We are continually challenged to meet that expectation.

As with all institutions committed to the enterprise application world and the uncertainty of a dynamic competitive market, the future of your enterprise application is as predicable as *Harry Potter's first day in Transformation class*. There is a definite risk in developing a reporting tool that may be obsolete the day after campus gets to use it.

One future concentration is improvement in reporting tools for administrative levels. The ability to drill down is widely utilized and scores high on customer service satisfaction surveys. Our next frontier is the drill up concept – how deans and department heads can move from information at the basic account level and consolidate data by department, college or division without jumping to an ancillary reporting application.

NC State's experience with reporting tools for its enterprise financial application has changed dramatically over the years. Starting with a reluctant and resistance user base in our early years, we've grown to understand the shortcomings in our early attempts at reporting options. With age and experience, we've gotten better at meeting our customers needs by recognizing that customer satisfaction largely rests in successful reports and reporting tools. Leveraging technology to achieve efficient solutions so customer service on all levels, *muggles or wizards*, is no further away than a click of the mouse.