TECHNOLOGY SOLUTIONS
CASE STUDY

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New York Academy of Art Revamps Academic Operations with RIO Education

NEW YORK ACADEMY OF ART

New York Academy of Art (Academy) is a private nonprofit art school in Tribeca, New York City, founded in 1982 by a group of leading artists who sought to offer a rigorous, traditional education in fine arts. The Academy offers a two-year master of fine arts (MFA) program and a one-year certificate of fine arts program. Serving approximately 120 students, the Academy aspires to be a center of creativity, learning, and expertise in figurative art. The Academy is accredited by the National Association of Schools of Art and Design.

INITIAL CHALLENGES

For more than 30 years, the Academy leveraged a legacy student information system that was developed in the 1990s and built on a cloud version of Microsoft Access. It was a low-cost

system, and Academy Registrar Sarah Sager compares using it to riding a bicycle on a highway, as it did not provide the functionality modern systems offer, such as workflow and built-in compliance support.

Data input and output to the Access database was highly manual, as Academy staff had to import and export information via spreadsheets. The manual business processes were prone to human error and siloed by department. As an example, for the Registrar's Office to create student course schedules three times a year, students first registered for courses using Google Forms. Sager then manually entered the Google Form information into Microsoft Access and individually generated PDFs of each student's schedule.

SELECTING RIO EDUCATION

The Academy kept a pulse on available student system options for several years but began more seriously evaluating solutions in 2019. By the summer of 2020, the Academy's functional teams had concluded that Salesforce CRM met many of the school's cross-departmental requirements. After agreeing to license Salesforce CRM, the team focused its evaluation efforts on finding a Salesforce-native student system.

When Sager and her team met with WDCi Group (WDCi) to learn about its RIO Education (RIO) student system, the company proved it was dedicated to meeting the Academy's student operational and service goals and requirements. As a small school, the Academy does not have the same profile as most of the institutions student system vendors are accustomed to serving, and Sager says it was notable that WDCi was invested in the school's success. The WDCi team connected well with Academy staff and committed to offering a high level of support in deploying RIO. The Academy team found RIO to be a flexible student platform with powerful functionality that was in the school's price range.

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IMPLEMENTATION AND ROLLOUT

The Academy was one of the first schools to deploy RIO in North America, and WDCi worked closely with the school's internal team to manage the implementation. Sager (who served as assistant director of admissions and associate registrar at the time), the Academy's

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registrar, and an internal Salesforce administrator were the three key internal members of the Academy's RIO project team.

The Academy licensed, deployed, and integrated Salesforce CRM, Salesforce Pardot, Cayuse (for research administration), and RIO at the same time. WDCi provided sandbox environments for the Academy team to configure and test business processes in the RIO system. Throughout the deployment, WDCi analysts worked closely with the Academy team and were further supported by the WDCi technical team.

The Academy team began the RIO deployment in the summer of 2020 and launched the platform in January 2021 for all critical student processes. In the spring of 2021, prospective students applied to the Academy, and students were admitted and registered for their courses in RIO. Throughout 2021, the Academy consistently met with WDCi to adjust and refine RIO features.

The Academy project team sent out communications to introduce existing students and faculty to the new RIO system. They also held several Zoom training webinars that provided an overview and demonstrations of processes in RIO. The project team took time in the Zoom sessions to answer student and faculty questions.

Sager says the rollout was smooth overall, and students found RIO intuitive to use. Adjunct faculty members who teach at other institutions and have experienced multiple types of student systems have also reported that they find RIO easy to use. Sager says that when the Academy requires support or has a request, WDCi is always responsive and eager to help.

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PROJECT STATUS

Since the Academy has implemented functionality for admission and application, course registration and management, and grading, the school is now beginning to explore how RIO and Salesforce can support social engagement. The Academy recently launched Salesforce Chatter, an enterprise social network for students to communicate and collaborate with peers and faculty. The Academy is also planning a significant update that will involve improving its instance of RIO by updating it to the latest version and launching functionality for faculty and students to reserve rooms and classroom spaces and schedule appointments.

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BENEFITS

The Academy has found RIO to be a comprehensive student solution that fully supports all student-related processes for its accredited programs. Sager says that WDCi has worked with the Academy to configure RIO to support the school's specific requirements. For example, staff can add makeup days to the section calendar, which automatically appear on faculty and student calendars. The calendar provides a definitive source for students to check for week-to-week updates, and officially recording makeup days on the calendar provides proof to accreditors that each course has met the required number ofmeetings.

In the past, each Academy department had a siloed approach to managing student processes, including application, enrollment, financial aid, and registration. Staff maintained and manually updated static spreadsheets of student information in Dropbox. When a department required information from another department for an adjacent process, it was often time-consuming for the data owner to gather and disseminate it.

Sager says that deploying RIO has helped to break down the silos by providing the Academy with a central data repository and a single source of truth that each department can access in a self-service manner for their varying business needs, from billing to auditing course schedules for financial aid. In RIO, student processes interact in the same environment, which provides staff with more transparency into each student's status and needs at any point in the student lifecycle. RIO also offers flexible reporting options that allow staff to view specific information that was unavailable to them in the past. For example, Sager can now pull term-specific GPAs to more accurately see if students are on track to make satisfactory academic progress for their financial aid.

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Since launching RIO, Sager reports that processing course registration, which took two to three weeks using legacy processes, now takes approximately three days in RIO. In the past, Sager manually placed students in their selected courses, and as the courses filled up, she reconfigured student schedules to ensure each student took their required courses. In RIO, students have self-service access to plan their schedules and register through a portal. They can see the remaining openings in each course in real time and replace a course that has reached capacity with a backup option when required.

The Academy's finance team says that RIO provides efficiencies for issuing bills and receiving tuition payments. After students are admitted, RIO redirects them to a portal to make their payments. Since the system unifies student contact and payment status information, it is easier for staff to view and contact students who have not yet made payments.

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LESSONS LEARNED

Sager encourages institutions considering RIO to keep in mind that Salesforce licenses are required to use the platform, which is an additional cost. Thus, institutions will need to strategically consider who should have the licenses. To get the most out of Salesforce and leverage functionality like running reports, staff will likely need to train to navigate the system. Sager recommends that institutions planning to implement RIO devote or hire a Salesforce administrator for the implementation, training, and ongoing configuration and maintenance of the platform. An internal resource skilled in Salesforce can support and streamline RIO training and adoption and ensure staff fully utilize its functionality.

Sager also says that deploying RIO has encouraged Academy staff to begin to think differently about data and data governance. The Salesforce platform provides role-based access to information and functions, requiring the Academy to consider the relationships faculty and staff should have to information and functionality in the system and ensure they have appropriate access.

REFERENCES

Tambellini interviewed New York Academy of Art Registrar Sarah Sager for this research. Tambellini also used publicly available information.

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The purpose of this report is to provide higher education institutions with information about the objectives, solutions, and outcomes related to the utilization of technology in colleges and universities across the US.

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