

Deans Need Data Too
An Enhanced Planning Tool at the University of Victoria



**University
of Victoria**

By: Sarah Berry, Millennium Software Solutions Ltd.

2018

Introduction

Most schools have data across hundreds of spreadsheets and/or within multiple data sources. It is difficult to access campus-wide data in one clear and user-friendly place. Many schools struggle to answer the question: how do we get all campus data, from various sources, in one place, in a clear and user-friendly format, along with the highest level of security and automation? The University of Victoria (UVic) set out on a multiyear, presidential initiative to create a tool that answered this question and allowed administrators, deans and chairs to view their annual data. This tool collects data from all necessary sources on campus and is placed in one uniform report. The tool is filled only with useful, easy to understand data these groups need and nothing more. The goal of this project announced by the President at UVic, Jamie Cassels, was to develop a set of tools and processes that could be used to assess the university's academic and administrative programs and compare these results to its strategic priorities and resource allocations. The objective being for budget decision-makers to be more attentive of their budgets and the performance of their programs through an annual review where centralized data is collected and consolidated into one report.

The University of Victoria (UVic) is located in Victoria, BC, Canada where it is home to around 22,000 undergraduate and graduate students, 900 full time faculty, 55 research chairs, 12 faculties & division and 58 academic departments.

How did this project come about?

'Today, many schools are experiencing regular budget cuts, some of which can be drastic. Unexpected budget cuts usually catch schools by surprise and schools might not be fully prepared for larger budget cuts. Prior to starting this project, UVic experienced a four-year period where government funding was flat or reduced. Like most universities across Canada, the UVIC's economic model came under increasing stress as increases in tuition (which were capped at 2%) and other income were not sufficient to cover the increasing costs of faculty and staff progression, and other university costs. Across the board, cuts were borne by both academic and administrative/support areas. This situation was not sustainable.'¹

Universities and colleges in both the United States and Canada seek various budgeting and reporting methods to better prepare themselves for future budget cuts. One resource that was particularly popular at the time of this project was Robert Dickeson's book, 'Prioritizing Academic Programs and Services: Reallocating Resources to Achieve Strategic Balance'. Some universities adopted Dickeson's recommended processes including the collection, measurement, weighting and ranking of programs and services, and the allocation of resources where it would best achieve strategic balance. While UVIC agreed with aligning university priorities and resources through the collection and measurement of data, a decision was made by UVIC to adopt their own approach.

¹ <https://www.uvic.ca/enhancedplanning/home/background/index.php>

This is when the President's Office at UVic announced a three year-long Enhanced Planning Tool (EPT) project. The goal being 'to develop a process with a set of standard criteria that will be used to align priorities and resources so that we ensure quality and success in our education, research and community missions now and in the future'.²

Phases of the project

The EPT project had three planning groups: a working group, advisory committee and integrated planning committee. The working group was comprised of about fifteen employees from various departments and roles on campus. The working group had the largest and longest role in this EPT project. Janet Dixon, Project Manager of Budget & Capital Planning, was one of the working group members, providing her experience and knowledge of accounting, the university's organizational structure, FAST Finance and other systems on campus. The advisory committee included Deans, Vice Presidents, students and management, where their role was to offer advice and feedback to the working group. As the various phases of the project were finalized, integrated planning was consulted for final approval. It was at this point University Systems, UVic's IT Department, began developing the Enhanced Planning Tools report.

Defining units of measure and criteria

The working group began the EPT project by defining a meaningful unit of measure to which they would apply a set of standardized criteria that would be used to assess the university's administrative and academic programs. The final decision was to use 'unit', or department (e.g. Economics, Accounts Payable). The six criteria for assessing a unit's programs or services are: quality, demand, productivity & efficiency, impact & contributions, context & opportunity, and financial considerations.

Organization structure and roll-up

After defining the unit of measure, the next task for the working group was to establish a series of updated organizational flow charts of each faculty or administrative department across campus. These organizational flow charts follow the university reporting structure. "Defining the EPT units was very time consuming, this process included consultation with all areas on campus, developing flowcharts, ensuring FAST Finance aligned with EPT, and everyone agreeing with the final university overview", explained Dixon. A lot of schools attempting to do a project like this might overlook this portion of the project, but without having a clear and formalized roll-up flow, schools could face some difficulties later on particularly when automating data extraction from ERPs and populating it into the EPT report. This was one of the longest, but one of the most important parts of the project Dixon was involved in, taking almost a year to complete.

² <https://www.uvic.ca/enhancedplanning/home/background/index.php>

Data

The final phase for the working group was determining appropriate qualitative and quantitative data and how it should be displayed. 'We might think we know what other people need when it comes to data, but we don't really know until we have that discussion with the end users', Dixon says. A lot of time and effort was allocated by the working group and advisory committee to ensure the EPT report included a series of informative qualitative questions and centralized quantitative data that would assist budget decision-makers in making informed budget decisions. During this timeframe, we learned users wanted a visual format using graphs and grids which are easy to use and easy to understand.

Qualitative questions for each criteria category provide EPT units the opportunity to explain their programs and services performance during the past year. While centralized quantitative data (e.g. student and financial), provide quantifiable evidence to support their responses.

Annual input

Centralized student and financial data is extracted from various systems across campus for uploading into the EPT report. The extraction and uploading of financial data originally was a very manual process and took a significant amount of time to complete. Dixon indicated 'this was not sustainable over the long term' which led to the Budget Office's next step of automating this process. The timing for this aligned well with Millennium's release of new functionality enabling UVic to accomplish this next phase.

Financial data is now collected into a series of reports, providing the format and detail required for populating the EPT graphs and grids. Automating this process increased productivity and improved accuracy in a timely manner. What once took about six months to prepare is now completed in two weeks.

This next phase included the creation of dynamic FAST Finance dashboards to help users understand and analyse the data reported in the EPT report. Since the EPT report is built outside of FAST Finance, financial data is static, and users are unable to see the underlying detail that makes up the amounts. To enable users to view this data, a FAST Link was created linking the EPT report to the FAST Finance dashboard. Dashboard graphs, within FAST Finance, mirror the EPT graphs and users can click on graph links taking them to a series of dynamic, customized reports with each level providing more detail. Users just have to follow the series of links. Dixon explains that by "providing data to users in one spot and capturing data that people either didn't understand where or how to grab it, makes this project so important and effective. The most important part of this project was ensuring users have the data they need right at their fingertips".

Other benefits

UVic realized other advantages and are using EPT data in other ways. Access to EPT data is not limited to units. The President, Vice Presidents and/or Provost are able to log into the EPT website and look at the data and unit responses, helping them to make better informed strategic decisions on budgeting and forecasting. The EPT report is being used by deans, chairs and administrators to complete their respective academic plans, accreditation reviews and administrative service plans. With the success of this EPT project, UVic is now using the new FAST functionality to build a customized Endowment application within FAST.

How do other schools do this successfully?

For schools looking to do a similar project, Dixon explains that aligning the organizational structure by creating thorough flow charts of the processes across campus is a critical first step. Having a person in the working group with a good understanding of the university's organizational structure makes the project a lot easier. Other suggestions to make a project like this successful are to have a diverse working group that provides good feedback, knowing the data sources on campus and what data are needed to automate into an EPT site. "When planning your processes look for ways to automate everything you can to reduce workload later down the road", says Dixon who previously spent 6-8 months creating similar reports for departments every year.

Conclusion

Every school has the data it needs in their ERPs such as Banner, Colleague, PeopleSoft, although, it can be very difficult to access and understand this data. When FAST is integrated in these ERPs, the data becomes much more accessible and user-friendly. By using FAST and UVic's customized Enhanced Planning Tool, UVic was successful in getting the annual financial data that administrators, deans and chairs needed in a clear and user-friendly format, along with the highest level of security and automation. Departments now have the data at their fingertips, without them needing to know where the data sits in the school's ERP or how to create reports. The specific and meaningful annual financial data and dynamic graphs are brought to departments and chairs through the EPT website. These annual graphs and data sets are automatically uploaded from FAST to the EPT website every year saving many budget holders hours and in some cases weeks of work capturing this data manually. The EPT report provides UVIC budget decision makers, at all levels, the tools to understand the performance of programs and assists them in making informed resource allocation decisions.