

Higher Education Profile:

Spring Arbor University Achieves Quick ROI with Oracle Cloud Applications



Spring Arbor's campus-wide implementation, code-named "SAU 360," defines a comprehensive strategy for transitioning away from legacy business processes and moving to Oracle Cloud Applications.

Introduction: Driven by Technology

With a comprehensive online learning environment and more students working off campus than on, technology is essential to fulfilling Spring Arbor's vision. Randall Melton, Chief Information Officer at Spring Arbor University, leads the college's Information Services department, reporting directly to the President's Office. He and his team support thousands of students, faculty, and staff members working at dozens of campus locations, as well as at various remote learning sites and online venues. The Information Services department also manages 20,000 alumni email accounts and coordinates access for hundreds of local community members and Conference Services visitors.

"My job is to provide cost-effective solutions that help the business achieve its objectives, with special attention to how digital models can enhance services to students, faculty, and staff," Melton explains.

From email to internet access to class registration, there is rarely a time when someone associated with SAU isn't interacting with a system supported by the Information Services team. Technology is essential to all campus business processes, but Melton believes that the "tip of the spear" in higher education is how technology is used in the classroom. For example, it should be easy to present, reframe and edit academic content for multiple needs, whether a faculty member is using a lab management system, a video conferencing service, or any other technology platform. "We have to streamline the faculty/student relationship throughout the learning process," he notes. "If we don't have technology working for us, then we impede our core mission."

Part of that core mission involves ensuring that the university's information systems enable students to have positive and productive experiences, both in and out of the classroom. For example, do campus information systems help students pick the right courses, obtain advice from counselors, and achieve their unique academic, social, and professional goals? Do they help students fund their college experience and take advantage of potential grants and scholarships? "All backend systems, from admissions and CRM to student

About Spring Arbor University

As the second-largest evangelical Christian college in Michigan, Spring Arbor University (SAU) supports approximately 4,000 students involved in more than 70 majors and programs. At the graduate level, SAU offers masters programs in business administration, family studies, education, management and counseling.

Spring Arbor University's Office of Information Services is responsible for the implementation and support of all technology across the SAU Community, whether on-campus in Spring Arbor, online, or at the learning sites across Michigan and Ohio. Areas of focus include:

- Academic Technology
- Enterprise Development
- Media Technologies and Infrastructure
- Technology Integration and Support

advising to financial aid, have to work in concert to ensure that students can complete what they started,” Melton adds.

Out with the Old, in with the New

SAU has been utilizing a Jenzabar student information system for the past 30 years, in conjunction with other legacy systems, some of which are 30 years old. As these systems became progressively less capable of meeting the university’s needs, “shadow IT” systems began popping up to close functional gaps, creating technology silos and disjointed processes that were difficult to manage.

“We had lots of deficient components and no 360-degree view of the student,” Melton admits. “We could not easily optimize processes or run analytics on those processes, and we had an incoherent vision of where our systems could go.”

The university’s packaged applications had accreted lots of “bolt-on systems” to make up for these deficiencies. For example, the finance department had a workaround for student billing and lacked integrated processes for producing 1099s and T98s—activities which had to be outsourced. Financial aid for online students was managed by spreadsheets, and student notes were maintained in multiple systems.

To complicate matters, many of SAU’s legacy information systems had been heavily customized, making them difficult to synchronize with new versions from the vendors. “Customization is a bad word around here,” Melton says. “We had one FTE spending about three-fourths of his time merging new code with customized code. In some cases the customizations were so extensive we couldn’t use the vendor’s baseline code when new releases became available.”



On the Path to Cloud

Like many institutions, SAU is adopting cloud technology to achieve greater resiliency, agility, and innovation. Melton believes that strategic adoption of cloud technology will make the university’s core business processes more efficient, save hours for staff members, and allow the Office of Information Services team to direct its attention to innovative tasks rather than routine



Faith and Values

Spring Arbor University is a community of learners distinguished by its lifelong involvement in the study and application of the liberal arts, total commitment to Jesus Christ as the perspective for learning, and critical participation in the contemporary world.

“IT is an enabler. We exist to help the business meet its objectives, identify the right solutions, and help business leaders understand their options, always keeping the needs of students in mind.”

Randall Melton
Chief Information Officer
Spring Arbor University

system maintenance. Getting there is a two-step process, which he advises other colleges and universities follow as well:

- Step 1- Look for obvious cuts in IT spending. Eliminate unnecessary systems and renegotiate essential vendor contracts.
- Step 2 – Once you can't sunset any other services or renegotiate any other contracts, it's time to rethink critical information systems with an eye to lowering long-term costs.



“Oracle empowers higher education institutions with a comprehensive set of cloud services for the entire student and employee lifecycle. We can tailor these cloud solutions to meet our unique business needs.”

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A Phased Migration

Melton and his team evaluated cloud-based information systems from Oracle, Unit4, and Workday. “Neither Unit4 nor Workday had the same capabilities as Oracle, especially for marketing automation and CRM integration,” Melton says. “Oracle had the best integrated solutions in these areas.”

SAU subscribed to several Oracle Fusion Cloud Applications for Student Financial Planning (SFP), Customer Experience (CX), Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP), Enterprise Performance Management (EPM), Student Management Cloud (SMC), and Oracle Analytics. Since completing the purchase, SAU has embarked on a three-phase implementation for each cloud application:

- Phase 1 - Get new functionality online, refactoring key processes where possible
- Phase 2 - Gain proficiency with the new applications and tools
- Phase 3 - Digital transformation to maximize the potential of key business processes and applications

Phase 4, says Melton, involves “watching the innovation pipeline” for new capabilities that the university may want to implement. “Oracle is continually

Making Cloud Connections

When properly integrated via the cloud, connected information systems simplify nearly all aspects of campus operations while personalizing experiences for students, faculty, and staff. Advantages include cost efficiencies, student success, optimized workflows, employee engagement, and student retention.

enhancing its products, so we keep an eye on the pipeline to determine which enhancements to take advantage of as part of our change management process,” he says. “Requirements are changing fast, and cloud technology is helping institutions to stay on top of things.”

Melton advises other institutions to pick cloud vendors that give them the flexibility to implement the components that matter most to their organizations—not merely what the vendor advises. “With Workday, we would have had to start with human capital management, and spend a year or more just on that one piece,” he relates. “Oracle allowed us to start with the products that best fit our business needs including a Financial Aid solution that is integrated with Oracle’s CX solution to supports student onboarding processes.”

SAU implemented Oracle Student Financial Planning and part of CX first to monitor and improve the student experience. Then they will roll out Oracle Cloud ERP and EPM applications to automate finance and other back office processes as well as the other part of the CX applications, which will empower staff members to track the success of various marketing campaigns and manage conversations with students via digital channels. Eventually, CX will also be integrated with a new Oracle student information system, allowing the college to maintain student experiences via one unified website.

Configuration Rather than Customization

For most institutions that are adopting cloud-based applications, Melton believes the 80/20 rule applies: Approximately 80 percent of the system should be deployed as-is to take advantage of best practices within the software, and no more than 20 percent should be tailored to unique business requirements. For example, there isn’t much need to customize an accounts payable process. It’s easier to adopt the best-practices model defined by the standard software.

When selecting cloud technology, education institutions should also take a close look at how each solution handles custom business rules. All software customizations should be done via low-code environments that are easy to implement and maintain. For example, Oracle student financial planning (SFP) has an event-driven architecture that allows institutions to modify the rules that govern each event, either via a Graphic User Interface (GUI) environment or by creating custom business rules with an easy to use scripting language.

“Some vendors only offer GUI-based customization tools, but will these no-code environments accommodate your needs?” Melton asks. “Oracle allows us to write custom scripts without messing up the 80 percent baseline functionality. This technique lets us customize what we need to while preserving the integrity of quarterly updates and software patches. We can thoroughly tune the business processes within a safe, upgradeable framework.”

This same philosophy applies to data integration, which Melton identifies as “one of the key technical components that IT must own and manage.” Here again, Oracle delivers. For example, SFP includes packaged integrations to accommodate ISIR guidelines from the government and automate the financial

“Oracle’s Cloud model allows us to focus on our core competency. It’s a division of labor that makes us more productive.”

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“Minimizing coding is great, and it has its place, but what you really want is a rules engine, along with the opportunity to write code when you need to. Oracle provides a broad set of tools to customize its cloud applications. It’s like a turbo button to tailor the applications for your business needs.”

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aid lifecycle. These out-of-the-box integrations automate the necessary connections, pull in the required data, notify students and financial aid officers as important events occur, and integrate data with other systems. SFP directs students to their portals to complete necessary tasks such as filling out applications and uploading financial documents.

“Most higher education institutions have 80 to 100 software interfaces to deal with,” Melton notes. “Oracle has native integrations and APIs baked in, which minimizes development and maintenance. We don’t want to incur unnecessary technical debt at this level, and Oracle provides robust conversion and integration tools.”

Meeting Students Where They Are: Mobile Access to Daily Tasks

Digital transformation in higher education centers on transforming the student experience and all of the processes that support student success. “COVID-19 is changing the service model for all institutions,” Melton explains. “More and more business processes need to be conducted online in a digital state.”

To achieve this state of automation, SAU began by examining critical business processes such as admissions and financial aid, then asking basic questions about how to automate these processes or move them to the cloud—always with an eye to maintaining the integrity of student information.

A big part of this digital transformation entails making sure that students can accomplish key tasks from their mobile phones, whether they are registering for classes, checking financial aid opportunities, planning degree programs, or attending remote lectures.

While SAU also subscribed to Oracle Analytics and data warehouse technology, Melton and his team are finding that many analytic capabilities pre-integrated with the cloud applications. These apps deliver analytic data points through real-time dashboards, accessible via a user-friendly portal.

The Value of Financial Planning and Analysis

SAU does not receive any public funding, other than the financial aid grants that go to the students, making enterprise performance management an essential tool for financial planning and analysis. “In higher ed you have to look at your adjunct model, your faculty model, and the cost associated with various programs,” Melton says. “Oracle Cloud EPM will enable us to analyze revenue by program. It includes financial planning and modeling tools to help us understand where the institution needs to tighten its belt to fulfill the overall mission.”

According to Melton, there are two approaches to financial modeling: historical and predictive. Historical modeling is like looking in a rear view mirror. The models analyze historical data to reveal facts about the institution. They help answer questions such as how many students are in each program and what are the direct and indirect staffing costs.

The flip side of that analysis is forecasting and planning, which helps financial planners look to the future. For example, how many classes and sections should

“Oracle Cloud Applications provide analytic capabilities within the context of people’s day-to-day work environments, so everybody can be data-driven. For example, the institutional research group will receive dashboard alerts as they monitor student outcomes.”

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“In the COVID era, EPM is no longer just a ‘nice to have.’ It’s an essential tool for creating and evaluating potential business scenarios. It can help mitigate the impact when organizations have to make painful decisions. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, this type of planning has become more important than ever.”

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be offered to optimize student success? How do faculty heads determine exactly which courses to offer, and when to schedule them, to maximize attendance? “I’m excited about Oracle Cloud EPM because it lets us take what we learned about the past and use that knowledge to build new models that predict the future,” he states.

Taking the Long View

The current business climate has forced colleges and universities to confront the most drastic budget cuts in a generation. Many institutions are reeling from a loss of revenue during the spring and summer terms, and they face an uncertain future as they adjust their operations to accommodate contracted budgets in the months and years ahead. CIOs such as Randall Melton must address some tough questions:

- How do you balance the need to innovate against the reality of flattening or shrinking budgets?
- Is there a way to use technology to enrich the teaching and learning experience while improving institutional sustainability?
- How can IT leaders guide technological transformations to increase student success, improve business outcomes, and drive new innovations for the institution?
- Which current investments in new technology will save money for the institution?

According to Melton, funding the acquisition and implementation of new technology is a big cost hurdle even in good times. Having a solid business case helps justify these initiatives, and the low up-front costs of investing in cloud-based systems minimizes capital outlays. He encourages institutions to adopt a 20-year time horizon. “IT systems should have a measurable return on investment, and it should be clear how technology helps the business optimize its resources,” he notes.

In SAU’s case, total cost of ownership went down 14 percent in the first year due to reduced vendor license fees, and the university anticipates additional reductions in IT costs over a five-year period due to savings inherent in a pay-per-use cloud model.

The university also expects to incur savings in staff time, since cloud-based systems require much less in-house maintenance. “Oracle’s cloud model does not require us to maintain servers, patch software applications, or manage security,” Melton explains. “Relieving our Information Services team of these tasks will represent the effort of one FTE. Oracle can manage its applications better than we can. This frees our technology team to focus on the value of the business processes, and to getting the most out of the new applications.”

“Oracle has an army of people to manage the data center and a much larger cyber security team than we do. We love Oracle’s shared security model. There is less for us to manage, which gives us bandwidth to focus on other things.”

Randall Melton
Chief Information Officer
Spring Arbor University

“Oracle has provided excellent resources to help us manage these projects. I’ve been amazed at its customer service and support people. We’ve been surprised at the level of handholding we’ve been getting from Oracle.”

Randall Melton
Chief Information Officer
Spring Arbor University

Advice for Colleagues

Melton cautions his colleagues to beware of simple “lift and shift” implementations, in which universities simply migrate their existing application stack to a cloud vendor’s infrastructure-as-a-service (IaaS) platform, such as Amazon Web Services, Microsoft Azure, or Google Cloud. While the cloud vendor takes over the hardware infrastructure, these educational institutions still have to manage all the applications, databases, and other platform services (PaaS). Instead, he advises higher educational institutions to opt for a true cloud model that gets the IT team out of the business of managing hardware *and* software.

“We are guided by an attitude of service here at SAU, and that extends to helping other institutions improve their operations and help their students,” Melton concludes. “Every institution has unique needs, and should conduct its own evaluations. They may not make the same technology decisions that we have made. But hopefully our experience, documented here, will help them to ask the right questions, and arrive at the conclusions that make sense for them.”

Contact Oracle To Learn More

With nearly three decades of experience in academia and over ten thousand of higher education customers worldwide, Oracle’s charter is to help educational institutions use data to unlock new possibilities for students, faculty, and staff. Oracle’s integrated suite of cloud-native solutions puts students at the center of the academic process with a connected set of digital experiences that improve academic outcomes and ensure student success. Powered by artificial intelligence (AI) and accessible through a modern user interface, Oracle Student Cloud enhances the student experience at every stage of the academic lifecycle. Personalized dashboards display real-time data such as grade point averages, graduation timelines, course completion calendars, and detailed account information to help students stay motivated and engaged.

To learn more about Oracle Cloud solutions for higher education, visit oracle.com/industries/higher-education.

Advice to Other CIOs

- Don’t try to deliver everything at once.
- Take a long-term view on costs (Melton projects a 20-year ROI)
- Use the opportunity presented by cloud technology to reset your IT staffing model

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