

Governet connects colleges

BY STEPHEN NELLIS
Staff Writer

Santa Barbara-based Governet has won a contract to provide its curriculum software to the entire countrywide system of the United Arab Emirates Higher Colleges of Technology.

Governet's software, CurricUNET, is a Web-based system that automates the once paper-intensive process of developing and approving new courses in higher education. Seventy-four of 112 community colleges in California are now using it, and 35 of 45 Illinois community colleges are in the system. In all, Governet has more than 250 schools signed up.

"Our approach now is that while we still sell to individual colleges, we now go after entire states and, with the UAE, entire countries," said CEO George Tamas. "It's our first countrywide deal."

CurricUNET helps take the paper and scheduling problems out of the process of developing and updating college-level courses. To create or change a course, schools need multiple layers of review and approval, especially if they're under the governance of a state or provincial system.

CurricUNET keeps everything in one database, standardizes the systems within a school and provides automatic e-mail updates to keep the process on track. At SAIT Polytechnic in Alberta, Canada, the college's various schools had different systems for curriculum development. The institution went live with CurricUNET in 2007.

"Before we implemented, this was all being done manually through a series of e-mails," said Neil Sanderson, manager of software services at the school. "It was really chaotic. It was a tremendous amount of back-and-forth and irregularity."

Santa Barbara City College also uses the system. Kathy O'Connor, an associate professor of physical education at the school, said the process was basically on paper before, leading to some telephone-book-sized meeting materials for the curriculum board.

"No more agendas that are 300 pages long — we've saved a lot of trees," O'Connor said. "It's really changed how we do business on this campus tremendously. It's really the only program in the country that does what it does."

One reason that Tamas and Governet have gone after entire state systems is the efficiencies it can generate for the schools. Governet is also working with the California Community College System chancellor's office so that it can link directly with campuses using CurricUNET.

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George Tamas
Governet CEO

"Once our board of trustees approves something, you push a button and it gets to the state," O'Connor said of how the system would work. "That kind of automation and use of technology is just unbelievable for us."

Tamas said CurricUNET has helped some schools cut the time it takes to bring a new course online from nine months to a month and half.

That's important to SBCC, which updates its curriculum twice a year instead of once a year. That lets it keep abreast of the courses that students need, especially for industries such as software training.

"They're the ones often on a fast track because to meet the needs of industry we have to develop new course work," O'Connor said.

AHEAD OF HIS TIME

While CurricUNET is finding success, it's been a long path to it for Tamas. A former computer science teacher, Tamas started his first business in the 1970s, "at the dawn of the mini-computer age," he said. After that, he worked

at a firm that eventually merged with Business Records Corp. In the late 1990s, he left to join Governet because he was intrigued by what it had set out to do.

Governet was founded in 1986 to publish a directory of licensed Nevada contractors. By the time Tamas came aboard, it was collecting government databases with all kinds of information and making them available to subscribers via a call-in phone line. The customers were mostly attorneys and real estate agents. Tamas

thought it was a great idea but the wrong technology, so he moved the service to the Internet.

"It failed. It was before its time," Tamas said. "We could get lawyers and real estate agents to pay for it, but the general public wouldn't pay for it."

A consulting project for SBCC got Tamas thinking about how he could automate some academic processes. Now that Governet has started to amass a lot of college course databases, the possibilities are nearly endless, Tamas said.

Tamas is working on a public interface that would let students and parents browse and search most of the community college courses offered in California — something never before possible under the old catalogue systems.

"Then the light bulb clicked on — What if we had a single repository of all this stuff? Think of the value to students and parents," Tamas said.

Farther down the line, he envisions iPhone and iPad apps that could essentially serve as a counselor in students' pockets, showing them what courses they need to earn their degrees and making recommendations to get back on track if they hit trouble. In the meantime, the schools themselves can dip into CurricUNET's system to see what other schools are doing.

"There's a great body of knowledge and a potential for sharing curriculum ideas across institutions," Sanderson of SAIT Polytechnic said.

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