



THE ADVOCATE



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Employee Federation of NHMCCD

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Spin City

Listening to various administrators do damage control with Colleague 16 and registration, I marveled that they could still stand up when they finished spinning what happened. Another registration is behind us, and the body count was high. A number of complaints from faculty and staff created a sense of *déjà vu*. Amid the confusion, frustration, and general chaos, many of us had the feeling we had been here before. Typical comments included:

- Colleague isn't designed for the size and configuration of our district
- the conversion was not necessary
- the timing of the conversion reflected poor judgment
- every year we have to learn virtually a new system
- District IT personnel do not adequately support the colleges
- we don't have enough technical personnel
- we should abandon Colleague and go with a more effective system.

As is usually the case, there is some truth to some of these statements, and some are in error. Clearly, this conversion experience in conjunction with registration proved to be a nightmare. There are, indeed, many, many problems, but not all are with Colleague itself.

A Brief History of Colleague

The college chose to go with Colleague in 1992. No totally acceptable system was available, but Colleague was deemed to be the best of the unacceptable. It was not designed for a multi-college system where each campus has a number of its own rules governing registration. We purchased the system knowing we would have to customize it. The customization was slow because each problem proved a major challenge.

Since 1992, with each new version in which Datatel updated their core software, our customized system

began to depart farther and farther from the "off-the-shelf" standard upgrade, a fact which made our upgrading a difficult process. Datatel worked closely with the college, studying the customizing we had done, and eighteen months ago they used our approach as the basis for Colleague 14, a version designed for a multi-college operation. They also made changes to their core software to make Colleague more universally adaptable. The college's challenge was to ensure that our customized version would fit into the new version, and subsequently into 15 and 16, leaving no data behind and getting all data stored in the right location, a highly detailed process assigned to the District's Informational Technology group (IT).

Colleague 16

Several windows of opportunity were available for the conversion to 16, each with advantages and disadvantages. Obvious windows were Thanksgiving (the ultimate choice), Christmas, Spring Break, or this summer. Any conversion period will lead to some disruption. The IT and college presidents decided that they had enough confidence in the new system and our ability to convert that they were willing to convert during the Thanksgiving window. A delay until summer would have allowed for more testing and, perhaps, a smoother conversion but would have delayed some desirable outcomes.

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The faster the conversion was completed, the faster we would be able to add features that made conversion desirable in the first place.

One desirable outcome of conversion would be to bring our system in compliance with Datatel's standard product, and we would be able to add on services without customizing in-house. Another positive was the system would be more "friendly" to the average user. Thirdly, telephone registration can now be an effective reality. Delaying conversion until this summer would have meant delaying telephone registration until next January. A summer conversion would mean that the college could not return Spring grades and register students for the mini-semester classes. Spring Break did not seem attractive. Christmas was too close to the Spring semester, and District techs understandably didn't want to give up Christmas, preferring to give up Thanksgiving instead. Thanksgiving it was.

Disruption

The original plan was to initiate the changeover to 16 and perform five to six tests offline by Friday of Thanksgiving weekend and then bring in appropriate staff for extensive testing on that Friday. Error reports from the testing indicated that the IT still needed to do a good deal more checking of the system, so we fell behind on testing by Thanksgiving. We were at the point of having to develop a new plan or go for broke and deal with problems as they arose during registration, the latter risk being the one chosen.

Two weeks before Thanksgiving, certain key staff had been requested to come in for the testing on Friday of the Thanksgiving holiday. The story on the compensation offered to these employees for disrupting their holiday varies according to whom one asks. Suffice it to say it was adequate to entice those employees to the

disruption. The conversion delays caused the IT to notify the selected staff to standby and plan to come in on Saturday for testing instead. Then the testing was pushed to Sunday. Finally, staff were called and told Sunday was scrapped as well—all serious disruptions to their holiday plans with no compensation. The system was finally ready for testing on Monday.

In the meantime, IT members were scrambling to handle the conversion problems. Their previous agreement to be available over Thanksgiving turned into twenty plus hour days for almost a week. IT personnel were put up in a nearby hotel, and they only left the office long enough to sleep a couple of hours, including straight through the Thanksgiving holiday. At least these employees were compensated for this disruption to their lives, but some controversy swirls around possible inequities in their compensation. One might conclude that this is no way to run our operation. We do an enormous disservice to loyal staff by subjecting them to such disruption to their lives.

The Aftermath

Data did convert well to Colleague 16. The delays in conversion prevented the planned successive testing after total conversion was complete. The college literally had to operate 16 the next day and register students, managing problems as they arose, and problems there were, the most significant of which was the inability of users to access student profiles, which are crucial to advising in registration. The data was available, but only through multiple steps rather than the customary one page overview. The IT committed to address this problem first, but we did not have enough personnel to remedy the problem by November 30; new problems began to surface, including difficulty generating transcripts. The IT began to have almost hourly dialogue with the colleges to decide where to focus their efforts.

A Windows interface is available for 16, offering icons and user friendly screens. Given the then crisis management of priorities, this desirable feature was passed over until a later time, resulting in users having to rely upon DOS commands—not a problem for veterans but a challenge for novices.

These and ensuing problems were not the result of any one cause. They resulted not from the inadequacies of Colleague alone, poor planning, or staff incompetence but from inadequate resources. If we had more money available, we could buy more equipment and hire more personnel to test for several months offline in a parallel system before attempting conversion. We are not Exxon—our current budget does not allow such luxury. Instead, we use existing equipment and personnel to accomplish a monumental task. There are seven to eight district personnel to work on conversion, and not all of them are dedicated 100% to conversion in that other responsibilities such as daily system management and other tasks demand some of their time. These brave souls certainly deserve all the accolades sent their way and much more, but we are killing them.

Problems Registration Week

As indicated earlier, the data did convert well to 16. However, getting the data stored in the right place, accessing the data, and generating reports proved problematic. The system initially worked slowly and quickly got slower. User screens locked up, and printers wouldn't print, causing an even slower registration experience for students. We did have advising profiles, but they required fifteen minutes to print, the only way to see them because we could not access them on-screen, rendering advising frustrating for everyone involved. These complications resulted in advisors sometimes spending forty-five minutes with one student. At NHC on Wednesday of registration, the printers would not print at all from 5:30 to 7:30. District personnel were on call to handle such emergencies but were only available through voice-mail activated pagers, and response times were lengthy, holding students up two full hours!

Prerequisites were difficult and at times impossible to verify, resulting in a number of students being misplaced in courses. In my two hours of advising, I worked with four students and could not complete the process for a single one of them. Each student had a unique problem which prevented my using colleague, and I had to hand them off to more knowledgeable personnel. This was not the sort of experience the union had in mind when, last year, we called for more meaningful faculty participation in registration.

Costs

I don't know the college's original cost for our first version of Colleague, nor the subsequent versions and the attendant customizing. No doubt, the cost is high. However, the real cost may not be measured in dollars. One real cost may lie in the toll this process has taken on our beleaguered personnel. The greatest cost may lie in the toll taken on students. How many students tentative about college in the first place became frustrated during registration and walked away during a base year? How many were misplaced in courses, became frustrated, and walked? There is simply no way to know. And what of the college's image to those who left or to those who managed to suffer through an obviously flawed registration? We can't measure these results, but the cost is surely there.

New Problems

Since registration ended, we have discovered new problems. Institutional Research has indicated that a number of its reports have been rendered obsolete. Over one hundred programs will have to be rewritten. Simple student data remains difficult and tedious to retrieve. By the middle of the third week of classes, NHC class rosters are still not printed. As of February 2, the payroll verification printout did not include all of the adjunct.

Remedies

Some registration woes could be remedied by better coordination and communication from the District IT and the colleges. Crisis questions from the colleges to IT should not go through pagers. Radios would provide instant response. IT personnel need to visit the colleges during registration to see firsthand the problems there. For instance, the District folks seemed unaware that the colleges could not see profile screens and did not appreciate the value of a printed copy, and it was too late to fix the problem once they did understand. Of course, dispatching personnel to the colleges would leave things undone at the District Office, but one person to each college for a couple of hours would go a long way in improving communication and creating a stronger sense of a team effort.

Ultimately, the Board must commit to increasing the college's infrastructure. The college is lean in a number of areas, but especially in computer techs. We must provide adequate personnel to operate our computer systems throughout the district, and

we should pay them an appropriate salary.

Is Colleague the horse we should have ridden? I'm not completely sure, but the question is moot. It is the horse we're on, and, given a number of factors, it is likely to continue to be the system we will move into the next millenium using. The bugs will get fixed, but unless we want history to repeat itself, the college must provide adequate personnel to run this system.

Special thanks to Jim Berry, Gary Clark, and others wishing to remain anonymous for their contributions to this article.

Alan Hall
President

Real Danger Ahead

In the November issue of On Campus, Sandra Feldman, President of the AFT, points to some serious problems in the nation regarding the shortage of teachers in the next 10 years. We all know that teachers are not paid well, and we know that teachers in many cities across America do not have the books and materials that they need to teach the children; the young people coming up know all this as well. Why would they want to become teachers? Feldman answers this question: "Young people who want to teach want to help children. They want to do meaningful work, to make a difference." But, as Feldman points out honestly, "They also want to support families and feel successful." So school districts, especially those which are already suffering a shortage of teachers (The districts where the need is greatest are usually the districts that have the lowest pay and the worst conditions.) are offering "signing bonuses" to attract new teachers: "Baltimore's lure was \$5,000 toward a house closing (for new teachers willing to live in the city), plus \$1,200 in moving expenses. Detroit offered \$3,000 just for signing on the dotted line. The Massachusetts incentive, far and away the most generous of any. . . , put up \$20,000 over four years for 100 of the top candidates." But, as Feldman says, "What will keep these teachers from quitting when the bonus is spent if salaries remain low and working conditions don't change?" As I was reading this article, I was shaking my head sadly in acknowledgement of what I already knew about America and teachers. But I was surprised and even more saddened by the

information that in Japan the teacher is the highest paid of the civil servants. It is shocking to realize that other countries value their teachers more than we do in America. America, the most powerful nation in the world, shows its priorities to be so skewed that an athlete might make millions in a season while a teacher is fortunate to be able to support his or her family in the simplest of fashions. Neglecting our teachers, America neglects the education of its children, "especially poor children." So the bottom line is that although there are young people who would like to teach, who care about the education of our children, they will not be going into the teaching profession because of the disrespect that America shows this profession by the substandard wages, poor conditions, and "lousy equipment."

"We talk a lot about computers, about the sophisticated and powerful technology that links us to the remotest parts of the globe. Yet most teachers, if they want to call a parent about how her kid is doing in math, have to go down the hall and wait in line for a telephone": this from Feldman who has visited countless classrooms across America. What can we do? We can support the Union in its efforts to educate America on its responsibilities to make the teaching profession more attractive so that our children will have quality guidance in the classroom, now and in future years. (from On Campus, November 1998 pg.5)
Nell Newsom
Editor

HERE ON THE HOME FRONT

Just this past week, my telephone has rung twice with rather desperate messages: "Can you teach for us this coming semester?" My plate is full. As an adjunct, I move quickly to see that I have a secure salary for the upcoming months, so I have had my teaching schedule planned for a couple of months now. I, like many other adjunct instructors, move from campus to campus in order to make a living wage. I am concerned that with the shortage of adjunct teachers (already becoming apparent), we will fill the teaching "slots" with less concern for qualifications, and more concern for warm bodies. NHMCCD, as have other community college districts, has turned more and more to the adjunct instructor. When a full-time faculty member retires, or the

position becomes open because of other reasons, the position sometimes goes unfilled and adjunct teachers teach the classes left open. Of course, the college is saving money because the adjunct teacher receives much lower pay and no benefits. But as jobs become open in more lucrative and sometimes more satisfying professions, the adjunct instructor may become harder to find. I noticed recently that there are fewer younger adjunct teachers than in the past. Many adjunct teachers are now approaching retirement age. Now, teachers with experience who have served many years in their profession are appreciated and are good at what they do as a general rule. But times change, education changes, new ideas come along and those teachers just out of college bring these fresh ideas to campuses with enthusiasm. I don't believe colleges can afford to offer so little to attract these young professionals. Is this a trend that we can afford if we are to give quality education in our colleges? A couple of years ago, Dr. Pickelman said that adjunct pay is less because less is expected from us. Perhaps less is expected, unfortunately, but I have to wonder how on earth NHMCCD could survive without the adjunct teacher. Colleges across America are more dependent on the adjunct teacher than ever before, and yet pay increases are not forthcoming, the possibility of being hired in full time positions is dismal, and there seems to be little movement toward including the adjunct teacher in decisions affecting the texts and curriculum of their departments. To avert a tragedy, "attention must be paid."

Nell Newsom
Editor

Is Geography Still Your Bag?

State	Capital
Oregon	Salem
Colorado	Denver
Texas	Austin

Please observe that the state to state capital combinations listed above share either one letter in common, two letters in common, or three letters in common.

Is there any state to state capital combination that has no letter in common? If so, their combination may be said to be "heteroliteral" (no letter in common). I could not find this long word in any dictionary to which I had access. Example: DOG and CAT are heteroliteral words. Should you find a state to state capital combination which is heteroliteral, let us know.

e-mail: Jim Moore/nhmccd,employee

Thanks

This Spring, in-service for Adjuncts was well attended. The Division session and the Departmental meeting that I attended were great. I went away with new information that I feel will help me to do a better job. I have been here at NHC for fourteen years, and it seems to me that over the years these in-service nights have improved. We not only were given some valuable training, we had a good time and some good food. Thanks go to Jennie Harrison, Teresa James, Margaret Nunnellee, and of course Judy McCann.

Nell Newsom

NEW JOB-GOOD NEWS

Teresa James has a new job - Director of the Faculty Staff Support Center. She is going to be very helpful to those of us who utilize her expertise. She is great with the computer illiterate -- a group to which many of us no longer belong, thanks to Teresa. There is no longer any excuse to be afraid of the "new technology," no excuse to stay with stale classroom lectures, no excuse for our students to leave our classes with "fear and loathing" of grammar. There are new ideas and new equipment available to us in Teresa's office.

She will be in an office in ACAD 217 and in the LRC. Also for information about the Faculty Staff Center, go to the Faculty Staff Center homepage:
<http://wwwnhc.nhmccd.edu/public/lc/FSCENTER/INDEX2.HTML>
 or go to the Learning Center, then click on Faculty Staff Resource Center. You will find equipment that the faculty and staff can use in the Center, learn to use, check out for home use, and so on. There is a lot of good information at that address about the Center. I urge all of you to take advantage of the Faculty Staff Support Center.

CELEBRATION

The AFT congratulates Board Member, David Robinson, who reminded the Board at its January meeting that this month marked the 18th anniversary of his election to the Board. Dave was the first candidate that the union endorsed and campaigned for on the Board. At that time, the Board and administration were highly resistant to union participation in the college. Times have changed, haven't they, Dave? **CONGRATULATIONS!**

CALL FOR ARTICLES

We invite you to send us your opinions, your news, your questions and so forth. the Advocate is a forum for information and free interchange of ideas. Send your articles to Nell Newsom, Editor, Acad 217, NHC or e-mail at IraN.Newsom@nhmccd.edu or submit to any of the following officers: Alan Hall, President, ACAD 217, NHC, Rich Almstedt, KC, Tim Howard, NHC, Donald James, MC; Allen Vogt, NHC.

CURRENT DUES

FULL-TIME FACULTY - \$22.80 per month FULL-TIME STAFF - \$15.65 ADJUNCT FACULTY and PART-TIME STAFF \$12.56

AFT President Alan Hall and Karen Hamilton, an AFT benefits specialist, will be visiting most college locations this semester to discuss the benefits of union membership. The schedule follows. Watch for reminders and details at your location.
 Tuesday, Feb. 23 - NHC Thursday, Feb. 25 - Tomball Thursday, March 18 - Kingwood Friday, March 19 - District Office
 Tuesday, March 23 - Montgomery Thursday, March 25 - Parkway Friday, March 26 - Carver

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