Laredo College's Ambitious SaaS Transformation

In need of a technology overhaul, Laredo College embarked on a complete strategic realignment to get them to SaaS.
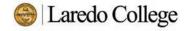
After 75 years of serving their primarily Hispanic community on Texas's southern border, Laredo College's technology had aged out. Best practices lapsed between staff changes, data was scattered across spreadsheets, and as industry changes began to accelerate, institutional progress stalled. "We're about 8 to 10 years behind most institutions," says President Minita Ramirez, PhD. "We've got a lot of catching up to do."

Like many higher education professionals, the administrators, faculty, and staff at Laredo College are not held back by dedication or ambition, but by resource constraints. Shortly after Associate Vice President of Information Technology Albert Chavez started, he embarked on the daunting task of auditing institutional needs across all departments and identifying technology shortfalls. There were many. And so, when Ellucian Sales Consultant Robin Stubbs reached out about a full strategic realignment, Chavez was ready to work together and hit the ground running. "All the information that was going to take me months of meetings to get, we did it in two days," Chavez says.

An assessment followed, identifying key areas of improvement and informing what would become Laredo College's Strategic Alignment Plan. With this two-year engagement, Laredo College's is partnering with Ellucian to define and support short- and long-term goals, manage resources, and navigate change throughout the institution. And there was a big change on deck: complete migration to a SaaS-based ecosystem that could support the institution now and into the future.

"We are technically the first Texas Connection Consortium member that is moving to SaaS," Chavez says. "There is a risk to doing this, being part of what the IT world calls the 'bleeding edge.' But we also understand the benefits will outweigh the risks." With the Strategic Alignment Plan, Laredo College committed itself to a fresh start.

Laredo College

CASE STUDY

Main Challenge
Laredo's technology and processes fell behind industry standards.

Solutions
Banner SaaS
Degree Works

Results
- Two-year SaaS migration plan to be delivered under budget in partnership with Ellucian
- Training and processes to be redesigned and united under Banner, eliminating inefficient information silos
- Degree Works to be implemented to support transfer- and workforce-ready learning pathways

Redesigning Processes

One of Laredo College's most immediate problems was training, which had fallen out of priority and practice. "Working in higher ed, it's very fast-paced," Chavez says. "People don't have time to think about what they are doing and question if there's a better way to do it." Instead of working in Banner's connected ecosystem, departments were completing tasks in their own individual ways not because it was the most efficient, but because "that's the way things had always been done."

"[The staff] just didn't have the training or the depth of knowledge needed to improve their processes and take advantage of the technology," Chavez says. "Because people didn't know how Banner functions worked, they started putting information into spreadsheets. And then, when we had to do state reporting, it took weeks for the departments to compile the information."

Gathering information from disparate electronic sources is hard enough, but Laredo College faced an added challenge when it came to paper-based processes. "There are so many paper files from so many offices," President Ramirez explains. "Which requires us to work on another piece of software to digitize all that, but then where do we put it? This is 75 years of documents and most of it has never been digitized." With Banner SaaS, however, Laredo College will gain the ability to compile and analyze large quantities of data, leading to deeper insights into student needs and more efficient, informed decision-making.

It'll take some growing pains to get there, though. Change is hard in any situation, but especially when confronting decades-old, baked-in inefficiencies. President Ramirez explained that there has been apprehension, but she knows the institution cannot fight against the future. SaaS is the way forward for Laredo College, and while the changes will be dramatic, redesigning processes doesn't mean throwing out old ways of doing things. It simply means empowering existing talent with new technology that will help them simplify, digitize, and enhance the work they're already doing.

"We want to give our employees the tools they need to be much more efficient, much more cognizant of the needs of our students and of our faculty at the same time," President Ramirez says. "Our folks work really hard. They are not working as smart as they could and we want to give them the tools to work smarter, not harder. This effort will reduce time on tasks that will help all of us to eliminate waste, reduce cost, and provide quality student/customer service."

Rethinking Security and Disaster Recovery

While SaaS is a proven option for secure data storage, it can be intimidating to imagine moving sensitive information over to a third party. "There are very

strong misconceptions about security," President Ramirez explains, relaying questions she has received about what will happen to the institution's data, where it will be stored, and how it will be secure. "There is a lot of apprehension about us going into the cloud because we do not all understand what the cloud is."

The truth is that Laredo College's information is a lot more secure with SaaS than it is on-site. While server rooms are prone to breaches and other disasters, reputable SaaS vendors have access to best-in-class security and can back up data in multiple locations. That—along with built-in tools for encryption and identity authentication—makes SaaS the safer bet.

If disaster does strike, Laredo College will soon be able to recover much faster. "We do spend our resources building our business continuity and disaster recovery plans, but there is only so much our budget allows," Chavez explains. "We would never be able to build anything like the redundancy that is available on the cloud."

SaaS not only changes how Laredo College manages its data but also how it maintains its technology.

"Most of our time is spent keeping the lights on," Chavez says. "Moving Banner to SaaS would also open up bandwidth for IT so we can become consultants ourselves and be able to better assist the users."

Instead of spending time patching systems and managing updates, IT can refocus its efforts on high-impact and innovative activities to further the institution's mission.

Reimagining Student Success

Of all the priorities detailed in Laredo College's Strategic Alignment Plan, student success is top of the list. Focusing staff time on this mission is crucial at any institution, but especially at Laredo College where most students are first-generation and speak English as their second language. Their needs are not one-size-fits-all.

"Many of our students don't have computers at home," President Ramirez says. "Honestly, some of them may not even have the internet at home. They use their phone for everything. So being able to have that accessibility is critical, and I know we can get that out of SaaS." Banner SaaS will also give Laredo College new integration capabilities, allowing them to easily incorporate the exact solutions they need. One such tool is Degree Works, which will make it seamless to include both course and non-course requirements in a single degree audit, further supporting a diverse range of learning pathways.

"We are the number one inland port in the nation. 18,000 trucks cross through here every single day," President Ramirez says. "The import-export and logistics economy here is in Laredo, and we have to provide the workforce for that industry and others. Inclusively,, we prepare students who plan to transfer to four-year institutions. We are also proud to support those returning students who wish to retool or reskill by taking a refresher course through Continuing Education or even acquire a new certificate or license." With Degree Works, Laredo College can support students on any pathway—including the sizable portion that is part of the dual enrollment program—helping to keep them on track and moving towards their goals.

Every part of the Strategic Alignment Plan ladders back to SaaS technology and the capabilities it will unlock for Laredo College. Such a complete transformation will make for a busy couple of years, but President Ramirez is secure in the institution's investment. "I know that the systems Ellucian provides work and I also think they are the best to support our work," she says. "And our students, faculty, staff, and community deserve the best."

Moving Forward with Ellucian

While the benefits of SaaS are clear to Laredo College, migration is not an easy investment. "We service three counties, but our only tax base is composed of the citizens of the City of Laredo. We have to perform miracles with our small budgets and be all things to all people." It was only with Ellucian that a path to the cloud became clear. With this partnership, Laredo College could navigate migration within their tight budget, leaning on support and expertise at every step.

"[Ellucian] said, 'Look, we are going to help you figure this out. We're going to move you into the cloud, and we're going to make sure Laredo College is successful,'" President Ramirez said. "How could I say no to that? How could we say no to someone who was willing to take a chance on a small college like ours, knowing that our needs are so great? And be so willing to help us grow and develop for the benefit of our students and community of learners. For that, I am extremely grateful to Ellucian."

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