University Profile

Columbia Southern University (CSU) was founded in 1993 by Dr. Robert Mays in Orange Beach, Alabama to meet the demand for alternatives to the traditional university experience. As one of the nation's first completely online universities, CSU provides students with the flexibility to fit an education around career and family commitments. All degree programs are offered online.

The firefighter with an unpredictable schedule, the soldier moving from place to place to preserve our freedom, and the single mother working hard to advance her career while supporting her children – these are the faces of CSU. In fact, almost half the current student body is active duty military.

CSU is one of the fastest growing universities in the United States and boasts a record enrollment exceeding 28,000 students. As it continues to grow, CSU's leadership remains committed to its original core values: providing excellent student service, a flexible learning format for the working professional, and a family-oriented working environment for staff and family.

Vicki Barnes | PHR, Director of Community Relations & Events

> "We are a technology driven university. Our students can access courses from anywhere in the world. APS provides a parallel to our level of technology with a payroll system that I can access on my smartphone. I can receive a call or text with a question, access the system, and respond in less than three minutes from any location ... We saved over $200,000 the first year by making the switch to APS. With the old system, we were paying more to get less."

Challenges

With an enrollment topping 28,000 students, almost 500 full-time employees and more than 670 adjunct professors, CSU has experienced exponential growth. One of the challenges of rapid growth is

ensuring that the University's systems are prepared to handle it effectively and efficiently, according to Vicki Barnes, PHR, Director of Community Relations & Events.

"One of the areas we knew we needed to address was our payroll system," explained Barnes. "We had a system from one of the larger payroll companies that was hard to use and very expensive. It also mandated the use of digital certificates which meant that every time you had a computer upgrade, a new digital certificate was required. It was a cumbersome and out of date approach."

Barnes said poor customer service further complicated the problem. "When you call into a large company like that, you are a case number instead of a person," said Barnes. "There was a lot of phone tag, even for simple inquiries. I have two notebooks filled with case numbers on every page from questions we posed that all had to be escalated to a case number assignment because the person answering the phone typically couldn't answer my question and didn't know anything about our university."

Requirements

With inflated costs of the payroll system as a growing concern, Barnes approached the university's chief financial officer about making a change. In doing so, the university vetted a large number of payroll companies and ultimately narrowed the selection to five.

Barnes said the following were primary selection criteria:

- **The University's goal was to move forward quickly to reduce costs, which meant that the company selected would need to be comfortable implementing a new solution in the middle of a quarter.**

- **The company's quote must demonstrate significant cost savings.**

- **The company must have an established track record of customer service excellence.**

- **The University wanted to move away from a digital certificate operational requirement for the payroll system.**

- **The company had to offer an easy to use online system that could be accessed from any location.**

- **Enhanced reporting functionality was desired.**

Results

Quotes and implementation outlines were received from the top five payroll companies. However, when CSU noted that it would like to make the vendor change as soon as possible, requiring that the implementation occur during the quarter, only APS Payroll was able to respond affirmatively. CSU selected the complete APS payroll, human resources, time & attendance and reporting solution. The first payroll with APS was run in May of 2010.

Even though we changed systems mid-quarter, the APS process was seamless," noted Barnes. "We have employees in 17 different jurisdictions, but they made it so simple. APS was very thorough and prepared us for a smooth transition. During implementation, APS even discovered that we had a credit in one state which exceeded $100,000."

Barnes said on-going costs have also been reduced significantly, and APS service has been superior. "We saved over $200,000 in the first year by switching to APS," said Barnes. "With the old system, we were paying more to get less. What APS says they will do, they do in every area from customer service responsiveness to compliance accuracy."

The APS online system does not require a digital certificate and has exceeded CSU's functionality expectations. "We are a technology driven university," said Barnes. "Our students can access courses from anywhere in the world. APS provides a parallel to our level of technology with a payroll system that I can access on my smartphone. I can receive a call or text with a question, access the system, and respond in less than three minutes from any location."

CSU is currently in the process of going paperless to reduce costs further. "With the APS system, we can upload all our company documents to eSELFSERVE," explained Barnes. "We can scan and upload documents such as performance reviews, which makes managing and organizing the documents so much easier. The system is so easy to use, and our employees have access to all their information online including previous W-2s and paystubs."

Reporting functionality was also an important factor for CSU in making the switch to APS. "I was surprised to be able to run all the reports without any help," said Barnes. "I have never worked in a system where you are provided with so many options for formatting and manipulating data into the specialized reports you need."

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