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Appalachian State University

Top Public University Uses **Fortis**™ to Improve Service to Students

Located in the Blue Ridge Mountains of northwestern North Carolina, Appalachian State University has built a national reputation for providing outstanding academics. With a student/faculty ratio of 17:1 and an average class size of 24, faculty members are able to take a personal interest in student progress.

Appalachian State University is a public institution and part of the University of North Carolina system. The university serves 15,871 students and offers more than 140 undergraduate and graduate major programs. Appalachian State University garnered the number 10 spot in the "Best Universities-Master's in the South" category in *U.S. News & World Report's 2008 America's Best Colleges Guide*. The university ranked fifth among the South's top public master-degree granting universities. Appalachian State University is also one of 186 colleges in the nation considered a best value for undergraduate education, according to *The Princeton Review.*

Challenge

When an educational institution has a long history, honoring and preserving its heritage is a top priority. Appalachian State University, founded in 1899, had paper transcripts and other academic records dating from the university's inception that had to be archived and secured.

"As you can imagine the older transcripts are very fragile," notes Gail Eller, technology support analyst. "Changes were made with correction tape, and over the years, the tape has become brittle. `If you're not careful it will come off when you handle the transcript." The Registrar's Office needed a system that could index and store these documents, and automate the retrieval process to minimize human contact with the delicate paper.

The university also wanted a better way to store and retrieve current academic records. The university is required to keep student records in hard copy for one year; then records can be stored electronically. "When students come back for certification or another degree, their transcript has to be retrieved and updated," Eller explains. "Students may also request transcripts be sent to other educational institutions." The Admissions, Financial Aid, and Human Resources offices wanted to take advantage of document management capabilities as well.

Industry: Higher Education

Organization: Appalachian State University

Location: Boone, North Carolina

Westbrook Partner: Triangle Solutions

Return on Investment:

- Improved efficiency in storing, indexing and retrieving student records

- Improved ability to share records between Admissions and the Registrar's Office

- Compliance with the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) and state regulations for storing student records

- Reduced need for storage space for state-mandated record retention

- Easily customized to meet the needs and security requirements of multiple university departments

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Solution

The university implemented Westbrook **Fortis**™ document management software to capture, index, store and retrieve paper and electronic documents. Triangle Solutions assisted with the implementation.

The Registrar's Office images Admissions files once a student accepts a place at the university. These documents include the entrance application, acceptance letter, and high school transcripts. Once the documents are scanned into **Fortis**, staff from the Registrar's and Admissions offices both refer to these records. **Fortis** also helps with administration of the university's student privacy policy. Every employee who will be working with student records has to sign a confidentiality form that is archived into the **Fortis** repository.

The Registrar's Office and the Financial Aid and Admissions offices capture 1,000 to 3,000 documents per week in **Fortis**. In addition, the Registrar's Office is outsourcing the capture of 35,000 student files dating from 1999 through the present. This project will allow the university to be compliant with state archiving regulations that requires student records to be kept for 10 years.

Fortis has dramatically increased the speed of data recovery for the Registrar's Office, which is responsible for maintaining and updating records related to a student's academic career. "For example, if a student calls because their transcript shows they have failed a course, but they tell us they have submitted a grade change form. We can easily check to see if we have the form. We used to have to go to the paper files to find this information," Eller says. "It's much easier to bring it up on your desktop." Using **Fortis**, the Registrar's Office staff can quickly answer a wide range of questions from students – from whether a transcript from another school has a particular course on it to whether a student has a name change.

The Registrar's Office is planning to integrate **Fortis** with their Banner Student Management system. **Fortis ImageIt**™ will be used to capture the student information from Banner and import it into **Fortis**. Then a user working with a student record can hit a preset function key and bring up all the documents associated with that student without leaving the Banner application.

The university's Accounting Department plans to use **Fortis** in conjunction with Banner for payroll processes that involve time sheets, W-2 forms, pay authorizations and other forms. Banner has some built-in workflow, but it cannot index and retrieve associated documents. With **Fortis** tools, documents and data can be shared from the Banner system.

Adopting electronic document management initiated a change in the university's approach to record preservation. State of North Carolina archivists had to be convinced that electronic document storage is safe and secure. "For a long time, archivists thought microfilm or microfiche was the only reliable storage medium," Eller explains. "We've been able to show that storing records electronically with backup on a server is a better alternative."

Fortis in Other University Departments

Sixty percent of Appalachian State's students receive financial aid, and **Fortis** has helped the Financial Aid Office to increase efficiency in organizing and accessing the resulting paperwork. Financial Aid images award letters, loan forms, income verification documents, correspondence, and other documents for easy retrieval. "It's been a great time saver for Financial Aid counselors, who no longer have to get up during a consultation with a parent or student to reference a paper file," says Assistant Director Lori Townsend.

Each financial aid counselor is assigned case files alphabetically. With **Fortis**, files are distributed electronically to each counselor's in-basket. In addition, loan documents are routed to the loan department and verification documents are routed to a verification specialist. Tracking documents electronically has improved workflow by making it easier to forward documents to the right staff member.

The HR department is planning to scan personnel files including pre-employment forms, medical forms, and employment appraisals. The complete employment record from beginning of employment to retirement or termination will be scanned and indexed into **Fortis**.

Gail Eller anticipates that the university's use of **Fortis** will expand. "Graduate Studies, Housing, Residence Life, International Programs, and the Controller's Office have expressed interest in document management and will come on board in the next few years."

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