



**THE STATE OF STUDENT INFORMATION
SYSTEMS IN HIGHER EDUCATION**
THE UNCOMFORTABLE TRUTH

A FIVE PART SERIES

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Introduction

5 New Realities of Today's SIS You Need to Know

You're probably sensing it's time to break off an old partnership.

For the past 15 years, your partner has been with you through thick and thin. At times, you've hated working together, while at other times you've been grateful for everything this partner did for you. But as of late, it is taking more time and money than ever before.

It's time to say goodbye to your current SIS system and look for a new one.

But before you embark on the journey, there are some things you need to know. The world of higher ed technology has changed over the past 15 years. High school graduates are coming from a different learning and engagement world than even their counterparts from Fall of 2019. Learners over the age of 50 are the fastest growing student cohort in higher education. Meanwhile, employers are demanding students graduate with modern skills, putting new pressures on the institution to innovate programs as fast as these demands change.

Yes, the world has changed with the pandemic, and using an old playbook to select your next SIS system will likely lead to a lot more pain - possibly even more than you're already dealing with.

There are five realities of today's SIS systems:

Reality 1: SIS Is Not the Heart of Campus Operations Anymore

Reality 2: Student SIS Cloud Products Are Still Very Immature

Reality 3: Cloud Is Not Right for Everyone

Reality 4: Cloud SIS Implementations Are Full Of Surprises

Reality 5: The Current World of SIS Is Hazy At Best

If you ignore any one of these realities, you risk being saddled with an inflexible system designed decades ago (and patched together to try and meet today's needs), or what we call new "vaporware" cloud systems that are more roadmap and vision, than current functionality.

In this document, we will look at each one of these new realities, what they mean for you, and what you can do about them.



Part 1

Reality 1: SIS Is Not the Heart of Campus Operations Anymore

Before SIS, a campus would process everything by hand, or on punch cards that ran through a homegrown system that was typically built by a graduate student. Information was scattered around the campus, was difficult to gather, and nearly impossible to use.

The large ERP systems changed all of that by automating traditional workflows. They were built to be comprehensive solutions and the “cradle to grave” processing for a four-year institution. The system performed large complex calculations for big cohorts of students, saving time and money. These systems were designed to make administration of a campus easier. They were designed and built with an institution-centric mindset.

Today, an institution-centric mindset is the kryptonite to enrollment growth. Your campus must take on a student-centric approach to strategy and design for student experience and engagement.

That’s why the days of a large comprehensive SIS ERP driving the bus are behind us. They were (and still are) built for administrators to manage back-office processes. They were (and are) not built to meet the needs of today’s modern campus. SIS systems of today can only be seen as part of your IT strategy, not the core. The core of your IT operation must become your Intelligent / Smart Campus strategy and the components that drive that. SIS just delivers data to that engine of the future.

Things To Consider:



Ask yourself, “Have we ever been able to make our current ERP system work the way we needed it to?” If not, what technology, policies and processes will need to be changed before we invest an 8-figure sum of money into SIS that is likely not that much more advanced in its architecture and flexibility?



What is your roadmap for implementing change? You may discover that you need to implement a Cloud SIS, or create a galaxy of purpose-built solutions. You may be better off keeping your SIS but scrubbing it clean of modifications, while investing in optimizing your business processes.



Before you start, have you championed the mindset shift from institution-centric to student-centric design? If not, you’ll be having déjà vu in about 18-36 months.



Part 2

Reality 2: Student SIS Cloud Products Are Still Very Immature

Finance and HR Cloud solutions work best because they support highly structured processes that are common across all industries. Finance must follow debit/credit structures, accounting guidelines, and the law. HR has highly regulated, structured processes to manage personnel.

This is not the case with Student systems. It takes many highly complex processes that vary between schools to support a student's journey. Vendors in the space have vainly tried to convince their prospective customers that they can configure an SIS Cloud system to meet any requirement. The truth is, today's SIS Cloud systems are not mature enough to support a wide range of schools with distinctly different needs.

The proof is in the outcomes. Many large schools that embarked on \$20M+ cloud SIS implementations are putting their implementations on hold.

Why? Because campus stakeholders discovered that the delivered configuration was not flexible enough to meet their specific needs. Sure, the sales team promised capabilities based on the school's use cases, but it didn't play out that way when the rubber hit the road.

To compound the pain, schools discovered mid-way through the implementation that they were trapped inside the vendor's product development roadmap. Their \$20M+ purchase was funding R&D to actually build a product the vendor had already sold, but not completed.

Some schools may have to wait for years for promised functionality to be available.

Finally, schools are reporting to us that as they've gone through the journey and that simply moving to the Cloud did not provide the needed transformation. All it did was reduce the risk of on-premise infrastructure failure. It has done very little, if anything, to improve work or student experience.

So while cloud SIS is being exposed for its immaturity in the market, purpose-built solutions (think of them as smaller, nimble, bolt-on technologies for your current SIS), are gaining traction - because they have the flexibility and functionality that Cloud SIS lacks.

Part 2

Things To Consider:



Go through the process of mapping the student and staff journey from end-to-end. Ask the important question about where technology is a help and a hindrance. What policy, procedure, people, system, and structure changes are needed first - before automating anything? Hint: Our most recent engagement with a college found over 30 such hindrances to student success. Fixing those was an important step before any technology purchases.



Ask yourself what solutions could address specific points in a student's journey that are currently bottlenecks. A mature, purpose-built solution likely exists to solve that problem, and likely has more capability than a less mature Cloud SIS. When things change, it is a lot easier to replace or optimize a single-purpose solution than a comprehensive ERP.



Consider bringing the whole institution on to whatever purpose-built solution(s) you choose. Multiple instances of the same solution drive needless complexity and expense.



Update business processes to be similar across the organization. This will reduce the need for multiple solutions.

Part 3

Reality 3: Cloud Is Not for Everyone

Cloud SIS systems work best for smaller institutions that are not complex, have a focused course catalog, conventional schedules and structures, and can unify their student processes across the institution. Cloud SIS systems also work well for schools replacing an old home-grown legacy system, as long as the school is willing to optimize business processes before the software implementation.

However, Cloud SIS are less successful in large, complex, highly regulated institutions. These schools have so many competing requirements (and departments), that it is impossible to get stakeholders to align their processes in a way a Cloud SIS can support. Remember, Cloud SIS is not built to be nimble, and customizable to your business process. It requires you to fall into their way of doing things. That's a lot of change management and professional development in an already complex institution.

Cloud SIS is only ideal for schools that can take the current out-of-the-box functionality and use it to be successful. If your business process requires you to have to wait for key functionality on the vendor roadmap, the current release or next release, you're in for a world of hurt. The only way you'll know if out-of-the-box functionality will work for you, is to have documented all your business processes before sitting down with a software vendor to understand their capabilities.

Part 3

Things To Consider:



Before you start evaluating Cloud-based SIS systems, complete a thorough self-assessment. Will you be able to align processes, policies, and procedures to how a Cloud SIS operates? Or do you need the Cloud SIS to align to your unique way of doing business?



Compare your vital “must-have” functional needs to the vendor roadmap. Be realistic about what you need now and what you can wait for. If a vital capability won’t come out for another two or three or four releases after you go live, realize that you may have to wait 18 months or longer for that functionality. Also know that there are a lot of other clients waiting in line for their resources, so your wait could be even longer.



How will you comply with your State regulatory and legislative requirements? Like all SIS vendors, Cloud Vendors only support Federal regulations. Do you have the skill set in the new software to create the custom solutions that will be required?



Determine if you can strip the modifications off of your current SIS and leverage new capabilities the vendor has released for your ERP SIS – until Cloud SIS systems in the market are more robust.



Part 4

Reality 4 – Cloud SIS Implementations Are Full Of Surprises

Cloud SIS implementations are never as simple as software vendors say they will be, and they have some unique challenges that sometimes take schools by surprise.

First, Cloud SIS systems often lack the key functionality you need. If you can't address missing capabilities through configuration or process changes you may have to do without until the vendor releases it—which could take years. Or bring in a third party solution to fill gaps. For example, many Cloud SIS are now complemented by more robust third party Admissions and Financial Aid solutions. Better to know that now, than 14 months into the implementation.

Second, the methodology many vendors use is restrictive. Most SIS vendors require you to provide spreadsheets of configuration and student data to an offsite team. They load the data and configure the system. You won't have the flexibility that you do in a conventional ERP implementation. It's a one-size-fits-all approach to configuration.

Third, most schools don't get the savings the vendor promised. Most end up spending a lot more than budgeted to develop solutions to support State regulatory and legislative requirements, or build custom systems for missing functionality in the core SIS.

Finally, paying annual cloud licenses out of your Operating budget and not your Capital budget impacts your mission. If your operating budget goes down, you may have to cut or eliminate academic or student programs to pay the license fee. Many colleges and universities have found that to be the case over the last 8-10 years.

Part 4

Things To Consider:



Don't make your business case for a new Cloud SIS based on the dollars saved. Be realistic about what money you will actually save. The Cost of Ownership calculator you will be presented in the sales process is flawed to say the least.



Plan for the financial impact of paying the license costs out of operations. Planning will help prevent making deep cuts or eliminate programs just to make a license payment.



Have all your business processes redesigned and aligned before you start configuring the system. We can't stress this enough.



Know which unavailable capabilities you will build around, or which you can wait for. Include estimated build time and costs in the project plan and budget. This will reduce stress and surprises.



Part 5

Reality 5: The Current World of SIS Is Hazy

We are at an inflection point. Higher Education and the various SIS systems must transform from an administrator-centric approach to a student-centric approach to thrive. The leading “cradle to grave” SIS systems were built 25 years ago for a different world. Even the “new” Cloud systems were designed 8 to 10 years ago, and despite being built from the ground up, replicate the administrator-centric capabilities of legacy SIS systems.

Think about that and let it sink in.

Would you pay for a brand new car that didn't have mobile phone integration, smart technology, or the latest safety features? Would you be willing to take delivery of the car at full price today, with the promise that those features will be “coming soon”?

Older SIS are too large and inflexible to be the nimble student-centric systems schools need. Meanwhile, the newer Cloud SIS systems don't have the capabilities to support large complex institutions. This is why so many schools who were early adopters are putting their entire initiatives on hold.

Many institutions are not putting in a new SIS but instead assessing what new capabilities in their current SIS can be leveraged instead. Others are turning to purpose-built (smaller) solutions for key areas like recruiting and financial aid. These systems are easier to replace than an entire SIS. Purpose-built solutions provide key functionality faster – without waiting on the SIS vendor roadmap to deliver the product being sold.

Part 5

Things To Consider:



Before looking at a new SIS, be clear on what your strategic goals and objectives are. They should be concise, actively worded, and measurable to guide your decisions.



Review each step of your major business processes. What manual processes can you automate? Why are you using processes that require system modifications?



Decide what approach works best for you. Is a Cloud SIS the best support for reaching your goals? Is it better to assess new functionality in your current SIS, or should you use purpose-built solutions to support your students' journey?



When selecting a partner, recognize where their loyalties lie; you or the vendor that brought them to you or certified them? Choose an agnostic partner early in the process that understands the future of Student Services and not just SIS systems. This will help architect your campus to meet student needs.

Putting in a new SIS doesn't transform your institution. It simply takes your current (good or bad) business process and makes it faster.

Real transformation involves the culture, policy, procedure, people, process, structure and software shift from institution-centric design to student-centric design.

If your school decides that's a higher priority than buying more software, we'd love to help.

Interested in Learning More?

Get in touch with us.



Matthew Alex
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Matthew is a former partner at Deloitte, where he led the Student Technology and Transformation practice. In that capacity, he oversaw some of the most complex Student Technology Transformation projects in the country. He also led Deloitte's Smart Campus and Future of Work initiatives. Prior to that, he was the founder of HTS Consulting, a technology and services company serving higher education. He got his start in higher ed almost 30 years ago as a clerk in a Registrar's office.

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About Beyond Academics

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