

The review of the **O**berlin **P**roject for **U**nified **S**ystems for the staff and faculty of Oberlin College

opus at-a-glance

December 1996: Oberlin College signs a contract with SCT to purchase the Banner administrative computing system

February 1997: Kickoff party for the implementation, now officially named the Oberlin Project for Unified Systems (OPUS)

May 1997: Functional training on the Banner system begins

December 1997: Banner Human Resources module goes live

July 1998: Banner Finance module and FAMIS system both go live

April 1999: Banner Student Records module goes live

July 1999: CBORD system goes live

August 1999: Banner Admissions and Student Accounts go live

October 2000: Banner Financial Aid module goes live

letter from the editor

by Ami Berger, OPUS Communications Manager

When I was hired as the Communications Manager for the Oberlin Project for Unified Systems (OPUS), I knew as much about Banner as I knew about nuclear physics: nothing. They hired me because I could write, and they needed someone to convince the Oberlin College community that giving up our current administrative systems—which all worked just fine at that point, thank you—and moving to a vendor software package called Banner was a perfectly lovely proposition. Hey everybody, won't a large-scale, three-year (okay, four), all-campus administrative computing overhaul be *fun*?

And so began *The Score*. I started out by talking to lots of people around campus about the project, since I knew nothing about anything and I needed something to fill up these four pages. The first issue was in September 1997 and the headline was "Welcome to OPUS!" I wrote the story (and took the silly picture of ACAC making rabbit ears over Ross Peacock's head, which I've reprinted on page 2), but in reality, I was clueless. Since I wasn't technically inclined and was still unfamiliar with the strange and complex workings of Planet Oberlin at that point, I didn't really understand the scope or purpose of the project, and I certainly couldn't fathom why everyone I talked to was in such an unholy twist about it. All I heard were dark predictions about the horrors

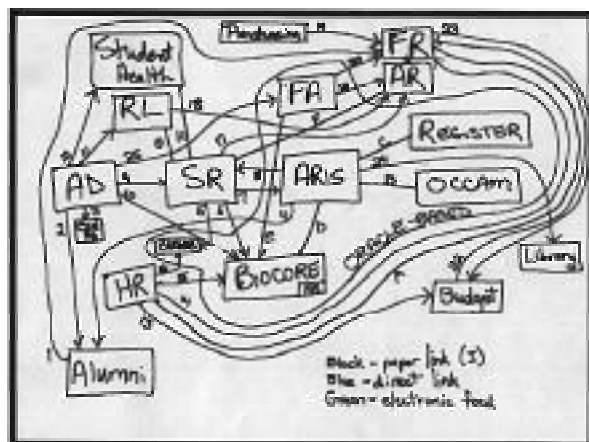
of Banner, threats to resign, and bitter grumblings about unreasonable demands and impossible expectations. The stress level on campus about this project was way high, up to eleven. Oberlin was *not* looking forward to Banner, and I still had four pages to fill every month, goshdarnit. It's just a computer system, I thought. Load it up, turn it on. Don't these people have a life?

Well, no, actually, now that you mention it, because (I learned) anyone on campus who was working on Banner, or any of the auxiliary programs like FAMIS or CBORD, was immediately sucked into the Great Whirling Vortex of Time and Space that was OPUS. That first year, I worked with the teams that were implementing the Human Resources and Finance modules of Banner. By the way, it's something of a misnomer to use the term "implement" when describing what those Banner teams did. It makes it sound as if all you do is put the software "in" and turn it on and then it works, like a kitchen faucet. Implementing a Banner module is less like putting in a kitchen faucet than it is like putting in an entirely new kitchen. And having to build all the appliances yourself, from scratch. With a pair of tweezers. While blindfolded. And with someone looking over your shoulder the whole time, saying "that doesn't look so hard. Why aren't you done yet?"

But I digress. Working with those first teams from HR and Finance showed me why the stress level around here was up to eleven. So much work, SO much work. Overtime, plenty of it. No weekends. Missed vacations. Winter shutdown? That's for people who aren't building refrigerators from scratch with tweezers while blindfolded. But they did it, bless them, those first brave pioneering souls: HR went live in December 1997, Finance and FAMIS in July 1998. We threw celebratory lunches for them, we gave them certificates and coffee mugs and Banner hats, we put their pictures in *The Score*. I tried to write stories that were lavish enough in praise to make up for the fact that no one had seen their kids for a year.

And then came the Student Records module. Holy moley. Every Banner module is monstrous

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Right: The "good old days": the infamous spaghetti graphic, an illustration of Oberlin's systems before OPUS

opus wrap-up

by Monica Wachter, Administrative Computing Project Manager

As I look back over the four-and-a-half years that have passed since the inception of OPUS, lyrics of the Grateful Dead come to mind: “What a long, strange trip it’s been.” My job as the manager of the project has always been a challenge, and many of my colleagues have become tired of hearing words from me like needs-analysis, functional requirements, timelines, testing, targeted deadlines, and drop-dead deadlines.

I’ve sometimes been called a taskmaster, but I would prefer to think of myself as a vision-keeper. In fact, much of my job has been to keep the end of the project in sight, no matter how far away the end actually was or appeared to be. And now we’ve arrived at that end; we’re in production on all four Banner modules plus FAMIS and CBORD. The entire campus can be proud of what we’ve accomplished in implementing all these systems.

So, does the completed project look like what I expected it to look at the end? Well, not exactly, but it is close. After all, one way that success could be defined is that it’s over and we can now do our jobs again without the interruption and frustration of making a system transition.

Another way to define success might be to compare our results to that dusty, idealistic, and carefully crafted mission statement that the original Administrative Computing Advisory Committee (ACAC), pictured above, came up with in response to the question “What is our goal?”

OPUS is an Oberlin College multi-year project which includes implementation of the SCT Banner integrated client/server system and other auxiliary software. OPUS will improve the way the college does the administrative work necessary to support effective teaching, learning, research and services for students, faculty, staff, alumni and other members of the Oberlin community. OPUS will define efficient and service-oriented ways of doing daily tasks, promote effective management of resources, address year 2000 problems, enable strategic decision-support, and enhance the college’s ability to respond to internal and external changes.

This mission statement, of course, was a part of the larger decision-making process that resulted in the signing of a contract with SCT in December 1996. As a campus, we decided that a vendor-supplied integrated system outweighed both a “best of breed” approach (in which we would have implemented modules from a number of vendor systems) and a “build it yourself” approach (in which we would have written the new system in-house). Looking back at this

mission statement now, I think we were more than a little ambitious in terms of what we wanted Banner and the other auxiliary systems to do for us; we might as well have said that the new system would slice our bagels, toast them, and serve them with latte.

Although OPUS was originally conceived as a project that would allow us to analyze our overall procedures as well as implement a new administrative system, that analysis was mostly ad hoc. While we did make some attempt at business process reengineering (BPR), much of what we did qualified as bootstrap process replacement. We didn’t have the time or resources to do a scholarly analysis and chart things like cycle times for cross-departmental workflow efficiencies. However, the summation of our desires as Oberlin College administrators to have a useful system to do our jobs well was still a good exercise. Indeed, we can even declare success.

OPUS has taught me that there are some essential ingredients for success for any project such as this. You need plenty of patience, focus, planning, and organization. Perseverance with a sprinkle of impatience—let’s just get the darn thing over with!—also helps. It’s important to take the challenges a day at a time by breaking the big tasks into manageable bits. And always have tissues and Tylenol on hand for sharing when the frustration and tears bubble to the surface.

Of course, OPUS will never be completely over. We are now in the thick of our third major Banner upgrade, and we have already outgrown our original systems hardware. The work on the move to Banner 5.x and the installation of new hardware will continue in earnest this summer. In addition, there are a number of other OPUS-related projects that are in our sights, including:

- Implementation of the Web for Employees and Web for Finance products
- Better reports generation and distribution
- Enhanced web services, perhaps even a portal
- Improvements to processes and procedures
- More electronic integration with systems like OneCard and content management software
- The CAPP submodule of Banner Student Records, which will automate the Degree Audit process

It’s important to remember that OPUS by itself has not improved what anyone on this campus does, nor would we expect it to. The extent to which each individual staff person managed to embrace the change, to make the best of it, to proactively restructure procedures, or to identify new opportunities, is the measure of our collective success. Congratulations to all! ■



ACAC, circa 1997

Words of wisdom: Banner veterans look back

Four years ago, a few dozen brave staff members plunged into the dark waters of system implementation. We've all come a long way, baby, but in the interest of 20/20 hindsight, The Score asked those staff members to imagine a bit of time travel. We wondered: If you could go back in time to the beginning of the project, knowing what you know now, and could give your then-unknowing self one piece of advice about the project, what advice would you give? Here's what the Banner veterans said.

To this day, it still amazes me that as bleak as it looked right before payroll [the Human Resources module] went live, it all worked out just fine. And every few months when I get overwhelmed by my job, I just think back to December of 1997 and realize that if it could turn out all right back then, it will surely turn out all right now. We've come so far!

*Millie Modic
Analyst/Programmer, CIT*



Millie Modic

I'm not sure what I'd say, but I suppose I'd tell myself: Don't worry, be happy, or at least as close to happy as possible.

*David Foos
Analyst/Programmer, CIT*

Banner is only the beginning...we have embarked down a path that will always be full of challenges. Many things are changing within higher education and administrative systems must constantly change with everything else.

*John Bucher
Director of Information Technology, C IT*

Get as much information as possible in writing—i.e., answers to questions, email discussions, etc. Keep good notes on verbal exchanges, add everything to your documentation and keep that documentation in some sort of order that makes sense to you.

*Sheila Harley
Administrative Assistant, Registrar's Office*



Sheila Harley

I would tell myself that it is the people who work here, more so than the vendor or their product, that determines success. Be prepared to reward initiative, creativity, teamwork and simple perseverance. Be also prepared to deal appropriately with folks who refuse to look outside of their own areas and will not, or cannot, compromise with others or the limitations of the product.

The ugly truth is that a major migration like this one will cause great stress and there will be departures that are not amicable. Do what you can to minimize that and stay on track.

*Ross Peacock
Director of Institutional Research*



John Bucher

I would tell everyone to be sure they get rested up and to have everything caught up to date. Before you start be sure you document everything that you do so that you will be able to test. Trust me: you will forget and then it will be too late. If you do not do this you will miss something that you need and it may not work. Most of all, try to have a good sense of humor and remember not to keep thinking of the way it used to work. Nothing stays the same.

You have to give it time to see the advantages this system has. There will be some things that you won't like but you must look at all the improved ways of doing everything. You will never have everything 100% perfect. We have been using Banner since January 1998 and I am still learning and it is still improving.

*Sharon Jaycox,
Administrative Assistant, Controller's Office*

It would be something like "get ready for change as a constant," or "get ready for a new vocabulary of funny-sounding form names and acronyms."

*Cathe Radabaugh
Analyst/Programmer, CIT*

...letter from the editor

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in its own special way, but the SR module is just so huge. At least with HR and Finance and FAMIS, the misery was mostly confined to the Service Building and the CIT. With SR, the misery was everywhere.

The work involved in a systems implementation is very hard to describe. It's taking every single thing that your office does, picking it up, dusting it off, studying it from every possible angle, having lots of people who may or may not know what they're talking about tell you what to do with it, and then finding a way to transplant it into an unfamiliar computer system that you don't quite understand yet but already hate. I don't mean to be melodramatic here, but it really can be traumatic. There were Banner meetings where people burst into tears. Or left the room in anger and frustration. We raised our voices at each other, we glared murderously across conference tables at colleagues with whom we had worked good-naturedly for years. We listened with gritted teeth when other colleagues, who should have known better, wondered why in the world we were complaining so much, why we hadn't returned their phone call, why this was taking so long, wasn't this just a computer system? Load it up, turn it on. Didn't we have a life?

Well, no, actually, now that you mention it. But it got done anyway. Student Records went live in April 1999, when PRESTO actually registered students for their fall classes. It kicked some out of their fall classes too, but by that time we were so tired we (almost) didn't care. Admissions, Student Accounts, the CBORD system in Res Life all went live. More lunches, more certificates, more pictures in *The Score*, more exhausted staff. And then Financial Aid, the last of them, went live last fall, in October 2000. Financial Aid, I might add, was the most anticlimactic production cutover ever. Don't get me wrong, the FinAid team worked just as hard as anybody, but by the time they came along, this was old news. People had already been to so many "Banner Live" luncheons that they could recite the menu by heart, and I totally forgot to do coffee mugs or hats.

But no matter which module you worked on, there was always one golden thread, one shining ray of light, a connection that bonded us all to each other and kept us all sane, and that connection was cursing Banner to the ends of the earth and back. "THIS %!#?&* SYSTEM!" everyone raged at everyone else. "TELL ME ABOUT IT, WHAT WERE THEY THINKING?!!!" everyone else raged back in mutual and unharnessed fury. When the SCT consultants came to train us on the software, they got to know the tops of our scalps better than our faces, because people were constantly dropping their heads into their hands and moaning "no, no, don't tell me" or "we're going to have to do WHAT?" When we still had QuickMail, someone designed a QM form that said "BLAME BANNER" across the top. And in the first year or so after we went live, there was very little that *wasn't* blamed on Banner. Here's a true story: right after the Co-op Bookstore closed, I overheard a conversation in line at the Java Zone in which one person asked her companion whether or not the Co-op had been using Banner before they folded. Her companion, in a wouldn't-you-know tone of the purest disdain, replied "oh, probably." "Oh God," I thought. The Co-op never got anywhere near Banner, in case you're wondering, but that didn't matter. BLAME BANNER. It made us all feel better.

Banner-bashing always made writing *The Score* sort of a delicate venture, because sometimes the people who blamed it on Banner were 100% right—there are indeed times when the system really, truly does suck, and as much as I was tempted, I really couldn't write stories for

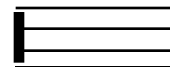
The Score entitled "Newsflash: Banner Sucks" or "Just Quit Now, Moen's Hiring." Monica (my boss) would have been, um, displeased, and besides, here's an uncomfortable truth: sometimes the problem isn't the system. Sometimes, the problem is us—what we're doing with the system or putting in the system or not putting in the system. This happens not because we are incompetent or stupid but because we are human, and because change is wickedly difficult, and also because Oberlin College is one heck of a weird place ("Newsflash: Oberlin is Weird") and it's difficult to explain such all-encompassing weirdness to a lifeless, humorless piece of computer code. This phenomenon, by the way, is not new. System-bashing (both legitimate and groundless) happened with the legacy system, and it'll happen when we go to whatever we'll go to after Banner. It probably happened when we still used carbon paper and index cards. BLAME THE TYPEWRITER.

Fortunately, we've all settled down in recent months, and much of the Banner-bashing has gone the way of the VAX: it's still around, but it's getting weaker. Nowadays, when I'm out doing a Banner install, or teaching a Banner class, people will often compliment Banner. "Oh my," they'll say, as they merrily Ctrl + Page Down and Rollback their way through the forms, "this is great, it will make things so much easier than before." At first, I didn't know how to respond to such optimistic words; it was like hearing a foreign language. I would sputter and stumble, and try to refrain from saying something like "oh well, you won't think so in a month or two."

But I've gotten used to it. And since the Great Whirling Vortex of implementation is now behind us, most people have, with varying levels of bitterness and regret, gotten used to living here in BannerLand. Sure, it's still a great big pain, there are still ways we'd rather do it, there's still a ton of work to do and there always will be, but for the most part, we're pretty much okay. I was training a staff member on Banner recently, and it was a very good session: she was picking it up, she understood how to do it, no problem at all. When we finished, I said "well, that's pretty much it, I think you're ready to go," and she looked at me and said "That's it? But when does it get awful?" I was very glad to be able to tell her that the awful part had already been taken care of, but thanks for asking.

And so, since OPUS has now gone from a project to just the way life is here, *The Score* is put to rest. Many, many thanks to everyone who gave me quotes when I pestered them and helped me crank this thing out every month, especially Barbara Winterich, Monica Wachter, and John Bucher. We're all swirling in other vortexes these days—anybody seen the tweezers? ■

The
Score



The Score is published by the Irvin E. Houck Center for Information Technology and the Oberlin Project for Unified Systems.

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