



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's Strategic Alignment Plan. With this two-year engagement, Laredo 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 Laredo 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



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

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.

Redesigning Processes

One of Laredo'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're 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 faced an added challenge when it came to paper-based processes. "There are so many files from so many offices," President Ramirez explains. "We're working on another piece of software to digitize all that, but then where does it go? This is years and years and years of documents since 1947 and all that has never been digitized." With Banner SaaS, however, Laredo 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 resistance, but she's not fighting 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're 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’s received about what will happen to Laredo’s data, where it will be stored, and how it will be secure. “There’s a whole lot of apprehension about us going into the cloud because they don’t understand what the cloud is.”

The truth is that Laredo’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 will soon be able to recover much faster. “We do spend our resources building our business continuity and disaster recovery plans, but there’s only so much our budget allows,” Chavez explains. “We would never be able to build anything like the redundancy that’s available on the cloud.”

SaaS not only changes how Laredo 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. “Really, 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. 17,000 trucks cross through here every single day,” President Ramirez says. “The import-export logistics economy here is huge, and we have to provide the workforce for that industry and others. And inclusively, we prepare students who plan to transfer to four-year institutions. We also are responsible for those who wish to retool or reskill by taking a refresher course through Continuing Education.” With Degree Works, Laredo can support students on any pathway—including the sizeable 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’re the best,” 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 the citizens of the city of Laredo. We have to make 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 could navigate migration within their tight budget, leaning on support and expertise at every step.

“[Ellucian] said, ‘Look, we’re going to help you figure this out. We’re going to move you into the cloud, and we’re going to make sure you’re successful,’” President Ramirez said. “How could I say no to that? How could we say no to someone that 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. And for that, I am extremely grateful to Ellucian.”



Charting the digital future of higher education with cloud-ready technology solutions and services, Ellucian serves more than 2,900 customers and 22 million students in over 50 countries. To find out what’s next in higher education solutions and services, visit Ellucian at www.ellucian.com.

