



PennWest Consolidates Systems with Experience

Pennsylvania Western University combines several schools' systems into one with Ellucian and leaps ahead.

In the 2010s, the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education (PASSHE) found itself fighting two forces: As the state spent fewer dollars per student, PASSHE was required to raise tuition costs to make ends meet; while a decline in birth rates caused shrinking enrollment numbers, further exacerbating budget problems. In fact, according to IPEDS data, from 2012 to 2021, the three campuses that make up Pennsylvania Western University suffered a 36% overall decline in enrollment, from 22,590 students to 14,474.

Eventually, under Chancellor Dan Greenstein, PASSHE underwent a complete system redesign, which included consolidating six of its universities under two regional institutions, to keep program breadth open and make it possible for students to take any class at any campus. Included in this consolidation, during the 2022-23 school year, PASSHE's campuses in the Pennsylvania towns of California, Clarion, and Edinboro all came under the banner of Pennsylvania Western University, or PennWest for short. PASSHE chose Ellucian Banner Cloud as its platform to consolidate each school's ERP/SIS needs under one state system, which they call OneSIS.

Teaching all the student information systems to communicate was one major component of the PASSHE system redesign—and Chancellor Greenstein says it's working everywhere it's implemented—but what about the student-facing side of things? What about the web portal students log on to for their daily campus needs? The campuses were using many



Case Study

Main Challenge

PennWest had to merge multiple schools' disparate systems into one cohesive experience to unify its campuses.

Solutions

Ellucian Banner
Ellucian Experience

Results

- Better efficiency and higher quality solutions for students
- More free time for staff
- Tailored announcements for students

incongruous student portals before the merger. To support student success, PASSHE needed to give students one across-the-board portal to simplify campus life. According to Ken Martin, an Applications Architect in the IT Services department at PennWest, they found their answer in Ellucian Experience.

Linking students and experience together

Martin matriculated at a school that used a different set of tech solutions—a school that he said didn't even have a student portal. Being able to use Experience to build a “hub-and-spoke” type of architecture enables a whole new level of involvement in the student's own academic path.

“We really do drive our students in the front door through Experience,” Martin said. “We've made a conscious effort to drive students there as the entryway into our entire ecosystem.”

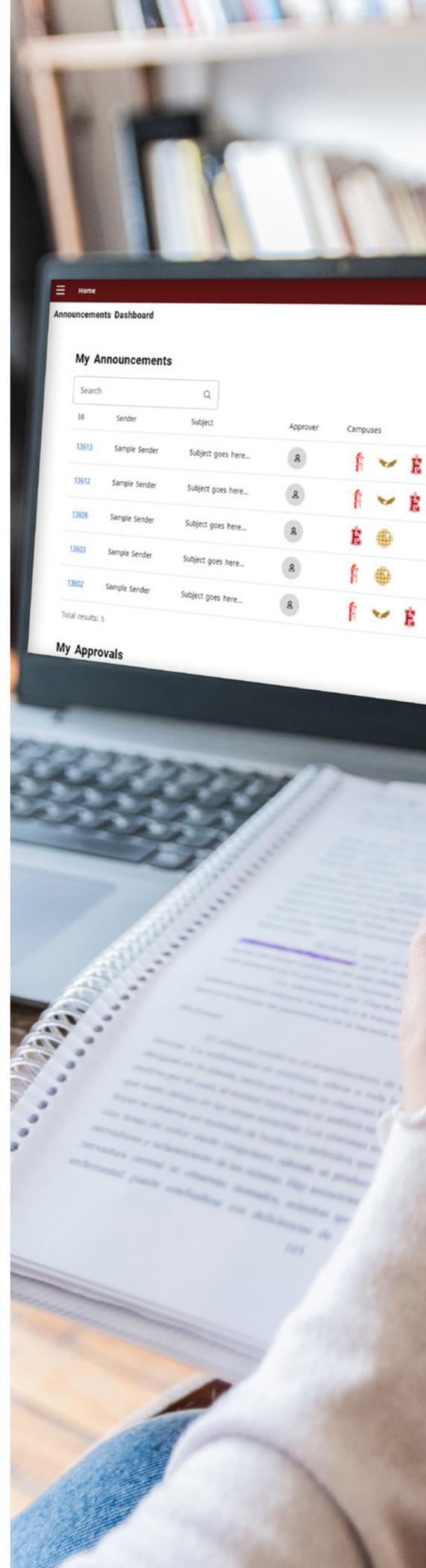
Making Experience a front-and-center component of student life includes ensuring that its single sign-on aspect will seamlessly integrate to the other apps that PennWest's IT departments send students to, making sure that they're delivering important info and tools to students through their instance of Experience, and much more.

“From there, it was just a decision to try and make Experience for us be as student-centric as possible, so I've always tried to take the approach of 'Are we gonna have links out to other systems? Sure,' but I've always wanted to try and drive more quality content, interactive content where possible, content specific to what the student might want to see.”

In other words, not only did PennWest make Experience a core component of student life, but they've made student life a core component of Experience. Martin said his approach is to ask himself how his department can guarantee that students get value from using Experience and how his department can make sure that what students see is quality, curated content as opposed to resembling a “link farm” like some other portals and software platforms. This has resulted in PennWest documenting 1.2 million Experience card interactions during the Fall 2022 term.

Treating common pain points with Experience

Martin was quick to praise the technology with which Experience is built. He said that it enables the team at PennWest to create their own custom APIs and custom cards using its SDK.



“That modern technology stack has really helped us do some of the things we want to do out there with system integrations and with third-party APIs,” he said.

Martin is a student as well as the Applications Architect, so several of the ideas they’ve implemented have come from his own experience as a student. He said that registration information and services were buried deep in the school’s website, making it hard for students to find when they were supposed to register, so his team customized a card on Experience to show when registration was set to open and close for students for each term.

The PennWest registration card can retrieve a student’s registration information, tell them when they’re able to register for classes for an upcoming semester, and help them get to the right place.

“It fits that pattern that I was interested in,” Martin said. “What’s some high-level information that you might be interested in as a student? ‘Well, when am I registering?’ So every open registration window shows up here, you can scroll between them and see all your different time ticket information between those open registrations. So I can see it right here in the portal; I can click ‘Register’ and then it’s going to deep-link me into self-service registration and I can interact with registration.”

PennWest has also developed a parking permit system within Experience so students can deal with parking passes and tickets. The parking permit system recognizes which campus a student attends, gives them a custom parking permit card for that campus, and allows them to apply for a parking permit there—all without leaving Experience.

“We have an integration that runs against that to actually feed that information into the third-party parking system,” he said. “There are online appeal forms so Experience can single-sign you into an appeal form and you can appeal a ticket.”

Looking ahead

PennWest fully rolled out its instance of Experience in Fall 2022 and it’s been a hit. Every month, they see around 12,000 unique users log in to Experience out of 12,000 students plus faculty and staff. Between 8,000 and 9,000 logged in the first three or four days of October 2023 alone.

“We’ve been trying to drive that student-centric experience, and what we’ve been trying to do is working with the student senate and some of the student leaders around campus,” Martin said. “We have teams of students that work with orientations and student government, so we’ve been reaching out to them and their advisers basically wanting student feedback.”



Martin and his team have built a group in their portal called Student Early Adopters, which connects them with some of the student leaders who want to make the Experience process better for their entire student body. This group grants the team a pipeline to those students to test new ideas for Experience and give them feedback. Overall, Martin said that it's been a good experience for them. Some of the feedback has been very positive and some of it has given them opportunities to improve their portal. Both help the team measure success.

Some of the content is also for faculty and staff, such as a campuswide announcement card that allows the team to review and either approve or deny important announcements that staff wish to make. The team uses the same feedback system for the faculty- and staff-oriented content as well. They have meetings with the faculty and staff to discuss their needs and if implementing is right for the portal.

"I'm open to feedback, positive or negative, and we'll course adjust," Martin said.



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