

Transforming Raw Data into Actionable Change

Lingnan University (Hong Kong) has long been recognized as a world leader for their use of online technology to improve the quality of the student education experience as well as supporting the quality of their institutional academic goals. It came as no surprise when Lingnan University deployed Blackboard Analytics™, the cutting-edge data warehouse and analytical reporting solution for higher education, to provide their university's leadership with the ability to make data-informed decisions.

Professor William Lee Keng-mun, the Associate Vice President of Academic Affairs, is responsible for growing the international student presence at Lingnan University. According to Professor Lee, having rich, on-demand access to information is critical for success. "I'm a sociologist but I have a background in economics and I know what data means and how to manage it. So I'm passionate about using data to bring change to the university and increase efficiency."

THE CHALLENGE: Finding the Right Analytics Solution Partner

Lingnan University, like many of its higher education peers around the world, has done an excellent job of collecting raw data from many departments across the institution. However, mining this data and turning it into useful information is a challenge that quickly runs into time, cost, and quality barriers.

"We had the Sungard Banner SIS (Student Information System) and tools like spreadsheets, but no focused system that brought everything together. So when we wanted data that was considered out of the ordinary, the request would take four days and an endless amount of manpower just to generate a spreadsheet. It was tough because our leadership wanted more constant evidence and information to help make decisions," says Professor Lee. He knew that the analytics solution they used would need to be delivered by a partner intimately familiar with the needs of higher education.

QUICK FACTS

- Founded in 1967
- Located in Hong Kong
- Government funded program has 2170 students, post graduate program has 2234 students
- Lingnan Universities vision is to excel as an internationally recognized liberal arts university distinguished by outstanding teaching and the highest standards of scholarship.



After two years of research, Professor Lee and his team had narrowed their search for a technology partner to two candidates: IBM Cognos® and Blackboard Analytics (formerly iStrategy). However, at the time of their search, iStrategy was only servicing the U.S. market, leaving IBM Cognos as the only vendor capable of meeting the university's needs. "From the onset, we wanted to go with iStrategy. They had a good track record of support and other institutions told us they were supportive and understood their needs. IBM [was] more expensive, but their support office in Hong Kong lacked higher education experience."

However, all of that changed after Blackboard Analytics™ was released in 2011. According to Professor Lee, "It came to our attention that iStrategy had been bought by Blackboard Inc. and had the ability to service customers internationally. That was all we needed to know."

THE RESULTS: Shifting toward Data-Driven Decision Making

Lingnan University immediately began focusing on its international foreign exchange program, which they consider to be an essential part of their undergraduate experience. According to Professor Lee, "[The International Foreign Exchange program] brings a lot of freshness to the campus when international students arrive. And conversely, when our students go overseas, they come back with new confidence in their language skills."

Blackboard Analytics provides actionable information to Lingnan University through its comprehensive data warehousing and analytical capabilities. For example, Lingnan University is able to identify cost expenditures related to their international program. This information directly benefits the university's leadership department when they are planning for future budget cycles. "We currently pay the airfare for every student that goes on exchange. This year alone, that meant flying 270 students abroad, so you can imagine the amount of money involved. In the future, if we want to reach our goal of sending 70% of our students overseas and we'll have to find the money for that. That's why that data is included in the system."

Furthermore, Professor Lee considers supporting Lingnan University's foreign exchange students as one of his most important responsibilities. Blackboard Analytics allows him to achieve a better understanding of student behavioral trends, allowing him to provide timely and effective support to them. "We found most of our students (from past years) liked to go to the United States. That's always been the country of choice. But drilling down into the data, we found that among those students studying in the United States, the majority liked to go to the

southern region of the country because of the warmer weather and lower cost of living. However, we found that students on merit-based scholarships preferred the Northeast, which they associated with the best universities. With that information on hand, we can now concentrate on identifying new partners in those regions. It's information that will affect our decision-making down the road."

And Blackboard Analytics has been able to show measurable benefits of a Lingnan University education, even to key stakeholders outside of the university academic leadership team. Li & Fung Limited, a global consumer goods trading group based in Hong Kong, has been a generous donor to Lingnan University's foreign exchange program for some time. But when that money runs low, the [Advancement] office would like the ability to approach them about renewing their commitment," says Lee. "In the past, we lacked the hard data to help them. Now, that information is available because it's all in the Blackboard Analytics data warehouse. Today, when we approach donors, we're not only going to bring students to talk about their experience, we're able to generate tables and data to show them a longitudinal picture that clearly demonstrates the positive impact that this scholarship has provided over the past four years. It's quite a change and a breath of fresh air – for us and them."

THE FUTURE: Flowing Empirical Data to Drive Education Policy

Professor Lee has been very pleased with the success of Blackboard Analytics at Lingnan University thus far. However, he believes that this is only the beginning. In September 2012, Lingnan University will begin focusing on its Experiential Learning initiative, and Professor Lee says that the information now available to him will be critical towards providing students with a rich academic experience. "Giving back to the community is an important part of what we do, which is why we make 30 hours of community service learning a requirement for our students. In the fall, I'll have the key information on my [Blackboard Analytics] dashboard to monitor each student's progress towards that goal."

Lingnan University's vision of data-informed decision making and successful adoption of Blackboard Analytics has given it a strong differentiator among other universities in Hong Kong. Many other universities are still using spreadsheets and similar static tools to analyze data and that's just not up to par says Professor Lee. "I really feel that Blackboard Analytics is going to free people from the mundane work of the past and enable them to focus on high-value policy making activities, and delivering the highest-quality educational experience as we can for our students."

