Published on *University of Colorado* (https://www.cu.edu)

Behind the scenes: How CU tackled unprecedented FAFSA changes [1]



April 9, 2025 by ES & UIS Communications [2]

University Information Services (UIS) recently completed a multi-year initiative to manage and implement government-mandated changes to the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and its impact on the University of Colorado's enterprise application for financial aid, Oracle Campus Solutions.

CU financial aid officers and the CU Student IT Services (CU-SIS) team worked tirelessly to adapt to constant changes and maintain services to CU students and their families [3]. Changes and challenges are still anticipated but will now be adapted into normal work operations or specific initiatives to develop new tools or processes.

UIS FAFSA Initiative: By the numbers

To mark this turning point, here is an overview of the initiative and its far-reaching effect.

- 14 Oracle post-release patches
- 233 combined bug fixes delivered by Oracle
- 2,314 CU employees' access impacted by higher security standards
- 34 UIS service requests: UIS-delivered fixes for broken processes, configurations, etc.
- 27 development requests: specific customer needs from CU's campuses
- 817 hours of work (a conservative estimate based on tracking in TeamDynamix)

Project complexity

The federal overhaul for the FAFSA application process hit numerous delays and glitches. Behind the scenes, universities across the country worked to adapt to the changes, meet new regulations and process applications on a shortened timeline.

UIS focused on preparing patches, adding retrofits for every new release and making campus-specific modifications. The CU-SIS team addressed 233 bugs over multiple deployments, requiring extensive testing and integration efforts.

Collaborative problem solving

The CU-SIS team relied on collaborations with CU financial aid experts from the campuses and their peers in the Higher Education User Group (HEUG), who were tackling the same challenges, albeit for their specific systems.

“For two years, the first thing I read every morning was the HEUG FAFSA thread to learn what wasn’t working now,” said Rick Rowcotsky, CU-SIS lead solutions manager.

Despite these challenges, the CU team was able to develop fixes and share knowledge with other institutions. Rowcotsky credited Brad Baker, assistant director of Student System Development, for his ingenuity and persistence in finding solutions.

Numerous nationwide Oracle issues occurred that CU was able to help resolve for itself and other peer institutions.

“It was great to give back to HEUG with a solution to a bug because not all universities have a development team like ours, and we reaped similar help from those that do,” Rowcotsky said.

Security upgrades

Strict security measures were implemented to ensure data was protected during testing and migration processes, specifically federal tax information (FTI).

Rowcotsky called out Fernando Loa, UIS PeopleSoft security lead, for his work that allowed access for 2,314 staff members. Employee Services helped implement a new fingerprint background check requirement for those with potential access to FTI. Updated processes allow those who use the non-production Oracle environment access to the application without access to FTI.

Looking forward

The team continues to focus on secure data management, data migration tools and a potential initiative for FTI tracking. Their ability to collaborate, problem-solve and share their findings. The work was incredibly demanding but helped the university — and ultimately helped make college more affordable for many students and their families.

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