

TECHNOLOGY SOLUTIONS CASE STUDY



Confederation College Achieves Accuracy and Efficiency in Budgeting, Tuition Planning, and Program Costing with Axiom

CASE STUDY HIGHLIGHTS

The Institution: Confederation College is a provincially funded applied arts and technology college in Thunder Bay, Ontario, Canada, that serves approximately 7,153 full- and part-time students.

The Challenge: Confederation College's budgeting, tuition planning, and program costing processes were time-consuming and inaccurate. The College sought to optimize its business processes and technology with a solution that enabled data-driven financial planning and forecasting and gave budget managers self-service functionality to take responsibility for planning their operating budgets.

The Solution: Through its RFP process, Confederation College selected the Syntellis Axiom Higher Education Suite because it was a fully integrated system that supported budget planning through tuition planning and program costing with robust data analysis, visualization, and reporting capabilities. It also offered a user-friendly budget planning solution with workflow functionality to enable collaboration between budget managers and accounting staff when creating and approving budgets.

The Result: Since implementing Axiom, Confederation College's budget planning and mid-year forecast processes have become more efficient, faster, and accurate. The College's tuition planning is more precise, staying within a couple of percentage points. Meanwhile, Axiom saves deans significant time on annual enrollment planning and has reduced the time required for annual program costing from over a month to a couple of hours. The College can also combine and analyze fiscal budget, enrollment, and academic program demand data for more accurate program costing, giving stakeholders unprecedented agility to make just-in-time changes to programs to meet student needs.

CONFEDERATION COLLEGE

Established in 1967, Confederation College is a provincially funded applied arts and technology college in Thunder Bay, Ontario, Canada, with additional campuses in Dryden, Fort Frances, Greenstone, Kenora, Marathon, Sioux Lookout, and Red Lake. Serving approximately 7,153 full- and part-time students per year, Confederation College offers a wide range of programs to suit the needs of students at every stage of their academic journeys. From certificates and diplomas to degree programs, Confederation College's 60 full-time programs in 11 areas of study provide hands-on learning opportunities and real-world experience. Confederation College's 2024 Economic Impact Survey estimates that the College will provide \$700.6 million in direct economic benefit to northwestern Ontario this year.

CONFEDERATION COLLEGE SELECTS AXIOM TO OPTIMIZE BUDGET AND TUITION PLANNING

Confederation College Chief Operating Officer Michelle Salo joined the College in 2019 and sought to help it optimize its budget and tuition planning processes to achieve better accuracy and process efficiency. The College secured funding from the Ontario Ministry of Colleges and Universities for its optimization initiative and began evaluating budget and tuition planning tools. Salo worked with stakeholders across operational, academic, and finance teams to identify their technology requirements.

After publishing an RFP and evaluating the responses, Confederation College signed a contract with Syntellis to implement the Axiom Higher Education Suite, licensing functionality for budgeting and forecasting, tuition planning, grants planning, labor planning, budget requests, and capital planning. The College selected Axiom because it was a fully integrated system that supported budget planning through program costing. According to Salo, enrollment is the driver of the College's entire budget process, and Axiom met its requirements with its robust data analysis capabilities to support tuition planning and enrollment projections. Further, Axiom was user-friendly enough for budget managers to learn to create operational budgets in the system, and it provided integrated workflow functionality, enabling collaboration between budget managers and approvers with commenting, document sharing, and digital approval capabilities.

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CONFEDERATION COLLEGE TRANSITIONS TO AXIOM HIGHER EDUCATION SUITE

The College started its Axiom implementation process in the summer of 2019. In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic extended the implementation's overall timeline as administrators needed to shift their priorities to support their community and ensure business continuity. Further, like many organizations during the pandemic, Confederation College's finance department and Syntellis had significant employee turnover. With the challenging implementation timing, Confederation College took a phased approach to implementing each module so the team could focus on each individual functional project. Confederation College also had limited technical resources, and it hired a consultant with technical expertise in the College's Ellucian Banner ERP platform. The consultant worked with Syntellis's technical resource to integrate Axiom with Ellucian Banner and map the data tables between the two systems.



According to Salo, Axiom's budget planning and allocation functionality did not require Confederation College to make significant adjustments to align with their needs. The other modules required complex technical adjustments, and Salo says Axiom has been a great partner in meeting Confederation College's Canadian and college-specific requirements. For example, Syntellis worked with the College team to restructure Axiom's tuition planning functionality and grant methodology.

The Axiom rollout required significant change management because it was both a technical and operational transition. Axiom empowered Confederation College budget managers with new tools to independently create and manage their operational budgets rather than relying on the accounting department as before. Therefore, budget managers had a high learning curve as they learned to take on more responsibility in their budget planning processes. The College's implementation project team provided initial budget manager training and continues to offer annual one-on-one Axiom refresher training.

CONFEDERATION COLLEGE SHARES LESSONS LEARNED FROM IMPLEMENTATION

Salo says that, in retrospect, it would have been ideal to set aside time for a preparation phase to review and cleanse the College's budget data before implementing Axiom. Since the team did not review the data up front, they took time throughout the implementation to address data issues and reconcile discrepancies between the ERP and Axiom's data and file structures. Salo says it was also critical to review the College's data and data management processes before and after the system migration to ensure the data's integrity, especially when implementing the labor planning functionality.

According to Salo, the Confederation College implementation team has also learned the importance of holding robust scoping sessions before implementing each module to identify and model the team's requirements and expectations. Documenting the scope of the work before each functional implementation supports the institutional team in working with Syntellis to refine functionality and troubleshoot issues. Salo says that overall, Syntellis is receptive to its higher education clients' feedback and continues to leverage client input to enhance the Axiom platform. For example, it recently rolled out features to make reporting more intuitive and has plans to enhance Axiom's enrollment planning and predictive analytics functionality.

CONFEDERATION COLLEGE GAINS BUDGET PLANNING ACCURACY AND EFFICIENCY WITH AXIOM

Before implementing Axiom, Confederation College's accounting department rolled forward the previous year's cost center budgets, and budget managers had manual, error-prone processes for submitting budget changes. The processes often led to significant budget inaccuracies, primarily in salaries and benefits, which comprise over 60% of each operating budget. Further, the College's financial analyst did not have an efficient way to review cost center or program outcomes to inform program costing. Now, Confederation College has onboarded more than 20 budget managers to Axiom, and they take a self-service budget planning approach that enables higher accuracy in operating budgets, resulting in an improved budget variance from 20% to less than 3%. All budget information is centralized, providing one source of truth, and administrators benefit from more granular analytics and detailed reporting.

Now, Confederation College has onboarded more than 20 budget managers to Axiom, and they take a self-service budget planning approach that enables higher accuracy in operating budgets, resulting in an improved budget variance from 20% to less than 3%.



With Axiom, the accounting department has a more efficient and productive budget review process, and staff can more easily identify and challenge unnecessary budget requests to align them with expected revenue. Overall, Confederation College's budget cycle and mid-year forecast processes are much faster. In the next budgeting cycle, Salo predicts that budget managers will be able to finish their budgets before the end of the fiscal year, which they have not been able to do in the past.

AXIOM IMPROVES TUITION PLANNING, PROGRAM COSTING, AND FINANCIAL VIABILITY ANALYSIS

In addition to enabling more accurate budget planning, Axiom has facilitated critical improvements in Confederation College's tuition planning, program costing, and financial viability analysis. In the past, each school's dean independently planned each semester's enrollment projections without having access to the school's student retention rate data. Salo says that by leveraging Axiom Tuition Revenue Planning, deans can now comprehensively analyze the College's fiscal planning, enrollment, and student retention data for accurate enrollment predictions within a couple of percentage points. Axiom's tuition planning automation also saves college deans significant time on annual enrollment planning, which they can now complete in a few days instead of a month or more.

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Further, Confederation College can combine and analyze fiscal budget, enrollment, and academic program demand data for more accurate program costing. Before leveraging Axiom, the College's financial analyst used a manual and error-prone spreadsheet process, taking over a month to complete program costing. Due to the long process, College stakeholders did not have access to the information they needed to understand the financial viability of programs in time to make changes for the next year. Salo says that by leveraging Axiom, the College can now run allocations for program costing in a couple of hours at the end of each year. Salo then extracts the Axiom data to inform scenario planning for each academic program, enabling unprecedented agility so Confederation College can make just-in-time changes and contributions to programs to meet student needs.

REFERENCES

Tambellini interviewed Confederation College Chief Operating Officer Michelle Salo for this research. Tambellini also used publicly available information.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The purpose of this report is to provide higher education institutions with information about the objectives, solutions, and outcomes related to the utilization of technology in colleges and universities across the US.

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