

CONNX[®] Case Study

Texas A&M University- Corpus Christi

Data access engine makes the grade on university campus



- Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi ensures data warehouse accuracy and real-time access with CONNX[®]
- Faculty and administrators turn to CONNX for timely reports that enhance decision-making
- IT plans major role for CONNX in its Web expansion, expected to yield significant cost savings and increase convenience

Texas A&M University - Corpus Christi
The "Island University"

Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi (TAMUCC) has a strong commitment to technology. Its operational philosophy, which summarizes key aspects of the school's mission, specifically states that "Through creative use of cutting-edge technology, the University can and should be a leader." To maintain a leadership position, the institution constantly seeks ways to give its personnel more access to information and greater ease in working with it. Recently, a data access tool called CONNX became an important component of this ongoing effort. With the CONNX solution, the university provides employees with easy, real-time access to student data from their desktops, while ensuring data accuracy.

Student information at TAMUCC resides in millions of records in a COBOL-based system. Although the legacy system handles day-to-day transactions efficiently, it does not make timely ad hoc reporting easy.

As a result, many faculty members and administrators had to acquire reports through the data processing center. The quantity of requests caused delays in getting timely information to decision-makers – a frustrating reality for decision-makers and data processing personnel alike. The implementation of client/server applications in the 1990s improved the situation since individuals could obtain almost instantaneous information at their desks rather than waiting for the data processing center to run and deliver reports. However, users still had to access the legacy data through a character-based interface.

In the fall of 1996, TAMUCC took another step in enhancing its technology environment when it created a data warehouse system that personnel could query through a locally developed Windows application. Although this solution made data access more convenient, it introduced two new

problems. First, the data warehouse tables were always at least 24 hours old. For some applications, such as enrollment counts during registration, the time lag was unacceptable. Second, attempting to convert the RMS flat files to relational database tables was at best problematic. At worst, inaccurate data resulted.

A search for a solution to both problems led Robert B. Wiedermann, the college's director of technical support for the student information system, to CONNX. "I immediately saw the advantages of using CONNX to access our student data," he says. "This data access middleware could serve as the conduit through which we could bring our legacy data into our data warehouse and it has done so with 100 percent accuracy."

In conjunction with CONNX, which Wiedermann and a system programmer installed on their mainframe in just one hour, the school used Delphi as the

TEXAS A&M Case Study continued

Windows development tool to create the Managed Query Environment. The Managed Query Environment allows users to request information through client/server programs over the university's Novell Intranet. The client/server programs use CONNX to retrieve data from the legacy servers to both load the data warehouse and, optionally, perform the same queries in real-time against the production data.

The combination of CONNX and the Managed Query Environment enabled TAMUCC to solve all the difficulties of data currency and accuracy. "CONNX gives us the real-time data access critical to many applications and, using the CONNX rotated arrays, lets us read the RMS files easily and accurately," Wiedermann says. In addition, employees gained a user-friendly interface on which they needed little training, given their familiarity with Windows-based programs. And regardless of the number of concurrent users, the volume of work never strains vital CPU resources because CONNX does the processing on the desktop.

According to Wiedermann, CONNX helped his department put into practice data quality measures and error checking. "We used to find it difficult to run diagnostics, but with CONNX we can easily check to see if the data is clean," he explains. "We catch errors early so they do not cascade, complete any necessary clean-up quickly, and provide users with fresh data every morning by 8 a.m."

Moreover, data processing personnel can now design templates for reports rather than having to run them. The university has developed approximately 50 basic report templates, along with variations to accommodate users' needs. CONNX allows users to view reports and queries almost instantaneously since the response time is only

as long as it takes to build the report or query.

Because data is current and clean, the school has substantially reduced costs on projects that depend on the most up-to-date information. For example, class schedules printed with current information have eliminated the costly, time-consuming need to print corrections or addenda. Wiedermann sees additional, quantifiable benefits down the road. "We plan to soon make tax credit information available for parents via the Web," he says. He calculates that on this project alone, using the Web rather than mail will save the school \$10,000 annually, in which case the solution will pay for itself in one year.

CONNX will also add value to the university's extension of its data warehouse to serve as the data source for its Web applications. "Test runs suggest that using CONNX will allow us to refresh approximately three million records in a rotating fashion every 30 minutes, which would guarantee warehoused production data no older than one hour," Wiedermann explains. Such speed will offer Web users virtually real-time data access, while ensuring that the actual student data remains secure.

From Wiedermann's perspective, solving the multiple data access challenges at TAMUCC could not have occurred without CONNX. "To my knowledge, there is no other ODBC product that could give us real-time data access and also allow us to incorporate the product into our existing Windows applications programs," he says. "The purchase of CONNX has provided us with the most 'bang for the buck' of any software purchase we have made to enhance our student information system and improve employee productivity."

About Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi (TAMUCC). A state-supported institution on the Coastal Bend of Texas, TAMUCC enrolls approximately 7,000 students. The university focuses on the higher education needs of South Texas and the state, and on coastal and urban issues, with special emphasis on Allied Health, Applied Technology, Arts and Humanities, Business Administration, Environmental Studies, and Teacher Education.

About CONNX Solutions. CONNX Solutions, Inc., with its flagship software product, CONNX, brings EAI/universal data access technology to over 3,000 organizations worldwide by enabling access to all enterprise data, regardless of origin, through one interface. The company maintains strategic relationships with industry-leading organizations including Microsoft Corporation; Oracle Corporation; Sybase Inc.; Informix; Computer Associates International, Inc.; IBM Corporation; and Compaq Computer Corporation. Founded in 1989, CONNX remains locally owned and managed through its headquarters in Redmond, Washington.



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