At Ohio University, Student Housing Has Its Head in the Cloud

Ohio University, a public research university located on a 1,850-acre campus in Athens, Ohio, is the first institution of higher education chartered through an Act of Congress and is the ninth oldest public university in the United States. The Athens campus enrolls more than 22,000 undergraduate, graduate and post-doctoral students, who hail from nearly every state and roughly 100 countries. Some 8,000 students now call the Athens campus home. First- and second-year students are required to live on campus, which encompasses 42 residence halls on three residential greens. A multi-phase housing development plan includes four new residence halls, now under construction, which will add more than 900 beds to the total inventory. The university manages more than $80 million in room and board charges.

Ah, the dorms. At residential colleges and universities, housing looms as one more formative experience for incoming (and returning) students. Roommates can become lifelong BFFs or the punch line at future reunions. Housing issues color academic performance, on-campus work/life balance, and the larger social networks that define the college experience.

Jeneanne Hacker, Director for Business Operations and Conference Services in the Residential Housing Department at Ohio University, couldn’t agree more.

“Housing is a big part of college life,” she says. “We offer a vital service to not only Ohio University but to the overall student experience as well. Our two-year residency requirement is important for many reasons. Students who stay on campus are better connected and more engaged, building relationships that are critically important with being successful on campus and with performing better academically. Living on campus leads to higher levels of retention and a higher level of student success.”

Ohio has been working with Adirondack Solutions for nine years and, a year ago, expanded its reach to the cloud, through Infinitely Virtual. As Hacker explains, “we originally had a homegrown solution to manage the student housing application process, to facilitate room assignments and process all charges from our system to a student's general ledger.”
“The student information system in which we were using was outdated and antiquated, so it was necessary to explore other systems that could manage student data from an institutional perspective, ultimately resulting in the university issuing an RFP,” she says. “Once a new student information system was selected, we concluded from that process that Adirondack would best replicate our business practices and successfully interface with Peoplesoft, the new student information system. In 2006, we implemented The Housing Director and have been using it ever since.

“For most of that time, we hosted the system locally at Ohio,” she says. “It certainly met our needs, but we recognized that, with internal IT, there were certain deployment schedules and expectations that created challenges and operational inefficiencies. With the introduction of the next-generation system, we also started to learn more about cloud services and what this environment could provide to Ohio while enabling us to meet our functional needs as we managed student data.”

Hacker and her team embarked on an education process, gathering information and, on occasion, attending cloud computing conferences, to better understand both the process of cloud migration and the value of making that shift. “As a team, we concluded that the benefits were clearly with the cloud,” she recalls.

For Hacker, migration to the cloud is exactly what you’d expect from a forward-thinking institution. “Ohio University is typically on the cutting edge,” she says. “We relied heavily on our partners. They would outline the guidelines for what we were expected to do -- security scans, sanity checks, making sure data was ready so migration would be seamless, and so on. We were preserving years of archived data as a result of having a large residential campus and from creating many custom attributes to support our business processes. As we migrated to the cloud, we recognized over time that some attributes weren't essential to meeting business needs and were able to re-design business practices for operational efficiencies and improved services.

“Our IT partners were a bit hesitant at times because cloud-based solutions hadn’t really been present at Ohio,” she explains. “Together, we identified gains versus risks, and had those conversations about what cloud-based solutions were able to provide to Ohio. We had to be very transparent about the challenges we faced while hosting everything locally. IT was open to hearing concerns, and advocated for a secure environment, where all student data was strictly protected. And we worked together to add features specific to Ohio. During the academic year, for example, we need an open and fluid room change process. We had to work out a means by which students could maintain privileges for the hall to which they’re assigned until room changes are finalized.
“From our perspective, the migration process was seamless,” Hacker says. Completed in April 2014, OU’s switch to the cloud has just marked its first anniversary.

**More than Moving the Furniture Around**

To the extent cloud migration has made system an even more powerful, more flexible solution, the move wasn’t simply a behind-the-scenes change, Hacker notes. “It’s had some real advantages for the quality and flexibility of housing experience at the university,” she says.

“Adirondack and the cloud server hosting environment are perfectly matched,” says Adam Stern, Infinitely Virtual CEO. “Each makes the other even more capable, providing higher availability to Ohio University and extending the reach of the entire Housing Director suite of solutions. The physical data center is no longer a factor – the university can increase or decrease bandwidth, right-sizing based on changes in business, and they don’t need to purchase servers or database licenses. That’s a recipe for sustained growth.”

“Hosted in the cloud, the system really is a great tool for us,” Hacker says. “Once we made the move, we recognized the value immediately. We regularly involve students in the building and development of housing lotteries, to identify the fairest possible rules for assigning lottery positions. They love it.

“Cloud migration has definitely had an impact on the student experience,” she observes. “The system is an excellent tool for us functionally but also from an end-user perspective. Here at Ohio, we’re very progressive in our business practices and in the way we engage with students. That’s especially important in light of how large Ohio is. The hosted system makes this very large institution feel uniquely small. We’re helping define what it means to be a Bobcat.

“For students who transition from their parents' home to Ohio, one thing that contributes to anxiety is who they’re going to live with and where they're going to live,” she explains. “Half the battle is feeling connected on campus, working toward degree attainment, and building connections. The hosted platform gives students an opportunity to go into the system, connect with compatible roommates via an advanced roommate search and take an active role with selecting their own room. Students who have choices are more successful with the process and more satisfied with the outcome. We’ve actually experienced a reduction of room changes during the academic year and increased student satisfaction reflective in a positive residential experience as a result of students being engaged and taking ownership in the room selection process.”

“We’re now seeing students who are happier with the residential experience because they were invited to be part of the room selection process early on and we were able to see selection trends that assists Ohio with shaping future business practices and making hall configuration changes,” Hacker says. “First-
year students who come in apprehensive about sharing a room with a student can now benefit from an opportunity to select a room and connect with students before even stepping foot onto Ohio’s campus. Indeed, according to one student, OU has gone “from MTV 2004 to MTV 2014 overnight.”