

Financial Sanity from Start to Finish using BudgetPak

The Customer

Located in Wyoming, both Laramie County Community College and Casper College are public 2-year colleges committed to serving the needs of the local community. Their rivalry is seen on the court as the women's and men's basketball teams compete in the Oil and Rail Series, which celebrates the economic heritage of Cheyenne and Casper — the railroad and mining industries, respectively.

Laramie County Community College, in operation since 1968 has over 5000 students. Its mission is “to transform our students’ lives through the power of inspired learning.” They award associate degrees in fields such as agriculture, health sciences, human and public service, business and nursing.

Casper College, currently with almost 5000 students, became Wyoming's first Junior College in 1945. Its mission is to be “a public, comprehensive two-year institution with a primary focus on student success that provides learning opportunities to enrich the lives of our students and community.”

The Problem

At some point, nearly every educational institution faces the question of when and how to move forward from legacy systems, typically Excel spreadsheets. While those spreadsheets served their purpose in their day, the time, manual input, lack of transparency, and deficiency in intuitive user interface made moving forward with a budget process driven by spreadsheets untenable.

Because of the time commitment required by these Excel-based financial processes, the finance team had less time to analyze, look forward, and utilize the full range of their talents within their roles.

“I realized that I wasn't doing analysis. I wasn't helping folks, develop, manage, and look forward... I felt like it was an underutilization of my position,” said Shaun.

For Laramie College, a solution was needed that would fit their unique shared budgetary governance model – process and resource allocation. They needed a solution that ensured fairness, and improved communication, so that there would be increased efficiencies and increased transparency of funds usage. Shaun was in search of a platform that would be flexible in accommodating their framework.

Brooke, on the other hand, was the beneficiary of decisions made prior to his arrival at Casper College in which his predecessors chose BudgetPak for their budgeting solution.

“BudgetPak is awesome. Less manual work and greater accuracy is A-okay in my mind.”

Shaun Ziegler, Director of Budget – Laramie County Community College

Casper College has more than 130 academic transfer and technical and career programs and 8 universities offer advanced degrees on their campus through their partnership programs.

Shaun Ziegler has been the Director of Budget at Laramie County Community College for just over 2 years, with 20 years previously at the University of Wyoming in Administration and Finance. Brooke Downs, Director of Financial Services at Casper College has been with the college for a few years and has over 30 years of corporate experience as a controller.

However, he summed up the feelings about the budgeting process that the College had back in 2015 by invoking a famously defeated cartoon character, *“Have you ever felt like Wile E. Coyote when it comes to budgeting processes, continuously unsuccessful and needing help?”*

Despite differing circumstances, the use of Excel within the budgeting processes of each institution had resulted in similar issues for each college.

- Too many files
- Too many versions of files
- Too time-consuming to combine files over and over again
- Too many Excel formulas
- Too little transparency
- Too little insight into historical data
- Too much process complexity

When a budgeting process uses a plethora of *“monster spreadsheets”*, as Shaun calls them, it is ripe for mistakes. Management of the process becomes difficult and time-consuming. When the inevitable turnover occurred, it was impossible to figure out the assumptions behind the data. This resulted in a lack of confidence in the budgeting data itself. Shaun felt strongly that the budget should be, *“more than a numbers exercise, but a meaningful planning process.”*

The Evaluation

Although Shaun's institution did not require a formal RFP and Brooke's did, both went through a similar process of software evaluations for their institutions. They gathered options, sat through demonstrations, and compared prices, functions, and compatibility. They looked at the budgeting modules contained with their general ledger systems. They reached out to peers to find out what they were using to discuss the good and bad of the options available.

Shaun stated that he, *"wanted a true budgeting and planning system. I didn't want another variation on Excel. I wanted the ability to efficiently engage staff and faculty as close to the expenditure level as possible. I wanted a system that would be flexible enough to handle reorganizations. I wanted the system to reduce the opportunity for errors and increase confidence in the data. And of course, I wanted to*

memorialize those budget assumptions, for years down the road."

Their research found that there are many systems on the market. Prices varied notably. Some systems proved to be too complex—too many bells and whistles—to be practical. Complexity was a concern for Shaun as he had to get people on his campus to learn and use the system. So, some of the software options were out of the running on that basis. Since Shaun had few resources in-house to administer and maintain the system, he stated. *"First and foremost, I must have top-notch service and support from the vendor during the budgeting season."*

Casper College decided to issue an RFP. They received four responses and a team of three evaluated each vendor.

The Solution

Ultimately, both colleges decided on BudgetPak as their solution choice. Shaun stated that, *"It aligned with our vision. It was intuitive (which) would lead to greater adoption and regular use of the system by our budget managers."* Brooke was of the same mind as he stated, *"(We needed)...a very simple and intuitive process for our budget holders to use."*

The features that Shaun and Brooke highlighted as being key to their institutions' adoption of BudgetPak included:

- Ability to streamline existing processes
- Intuitive interface
- Transparency at a cost center level
- Capture and memorialization of decisions
- Strong reporting and data analysis
- Robust support and training

The implementation phases for BudgetPak were very well thought out, and the end users within each institution were impressed with the level of support and training that BudgetPak provided.

BudgetPak allowed for greater efficiencies where the bulk of the budget process took place for each institution – behind the scenes. Dealing with headcount, wages, benefit calculations, etc. would become much easier.

But efficiency and support weren't the only positive outcomes. For example, Laramie College would be able to take advantage of the headcount feature in BudgetPak, giving their people the ability to see details about employees in their respective cost centers. This level of insight would result in transparency that had not existed previously.

The Results

BudgetPak stood out from the crowd because it was different. It wasn't just another Excel-look-alike program. Instead, it was a platform that made sense to their end users. Data and justifications were easily accessible within BudgetPak and helped those responsible for budgets to compare and analyze data across the years. Version comparisons, transaction-level data, and self-service reporting all factored into the success of BudgetPak within the colleges.

Shaun from Laramie County Community College said, *"We were able to set up BudgetPak in a manner that makes the most sense to budget folks, headcount, salaries, full-time positions, supplies, contracted services, etc. These customizable groupings of accounts help folks think about their future expenditures."*

Casper College found the ability to develop a budget, take it as a snapshot, and create a new budget based on that snapshot (while still having the historical budget) was a game changer. Utilizing several versions of budgets allowed Casper College to store multiple snapshots over time to memorialize budgetary rationale and decision making.

One of the annual hurdles that the adoption of BudgetPak helped Casper College to overcome was the yearly frustration of budget holders as they tried to submit their budgets each year. Previously, the budget holders would have to deal with complex Excel spreadsheets. Now, they could leverage the

simple user interface within BudgetPak. The intuitive nature of the solution diminished the number of requests for assistance from the budget holders that the finance team had to answer. In addition, the budget holders can easily review their budget inputs and detailed headcount information to make sure each are accurate, and can compare the data to actuals, forecasts or last year's budget.

The self-service reporting feature allows the finance teams to see what is driving the numbers at any level of the institution. Data can be easily exported to Excel for additional analysis, and changes loaded back into BudgetPak. The myXL module, a bi-directional link to the BudgetPak database, makes it simple to create and update custom reports for their state mandated budget book.

"BudgetPak automates 90% of building our budget book and makes it very easy to pull these numbers every year, producing our budget book with reports that are formatted correctly with the data in the right spot. This is a huge time saver." said Brooke.

It's the easiest in my 32-year career...the easiest budget process I've ever dealt with.
Brooke Downs, Director of Financial Services – Casper College