

Case

STUDY



Sidekick Helps Streamline Northern Illinois University's Scholarship Program

“I am now free from the photocopy machine and can divert my attention to projects that ordinarily get pushed back...”

Talk about a paper chase. For Northern Illinois University's Dana Gautcher, scholarship deadlines mark the onset of many hours of tedious photocopying and distribution. Gautcher, the scholarship coordinator and financial retention advocate at NIU in DeKalb, Ill., oversees the Scholarship Office, which coordinates all NIU academic and merit-based scholarships for incoming freshman and transfer students. On average, her office manages 600 scholarships each academic year.

NIU students can download most scholarship applications online, but the method for submitting applications is completely paper based. In the past, this has meant that two employees had to spend weeks compiling, filing and photocopying student applications and delivering them to all members of a scholarship's review committee. The time, labor, costs and resources required for this process were substantial.

With the number of scholarships and applicants managed increasing steadily over the years, the Scholarship Office needed to overhaul its outdated process. By installing a powerful desktop document imaging system, the office significantly increased its efficiency and productivity.

A Tedious Old Process

NIU academic scholarships operate somewhat independently, with the Scholarship Office acting as the central liaison between academic colleges and departments, the financial aid office, the admissions department and other departments involved with undergraduate scholarship programs.

Scholarship applications usually range from 6 to 10 pages and typically include an application form, personal statement, teacher letter of recommendation and school certification of a student's grade point average and ACT scores.

The office maintained separate paper files for each student and once an application deadline was past, began the weeklong process of pulling documents from student files and photocopying, collating and then hand-delivering stacks of photocopied applications to all members of the review committee.

Even reviewers felt somewhat overwhelmed by the mounds of paper piled before them. It was hard to keep all the applications organized, and reviewers had to watch closely to ensure that they did not accidentally omit or misplace a vital piece of information provided by an applicant.

As if that were not enough, once committee decisions were made, Gautcher and her staff had to transport the photocopied applications to the Scholarship Office and shred them.

“A Powerful Scanner for Small Offices”

“A small budget and an even smaller workspace made the idea of a document imaging system seem like a distant option for us,” said Gautcher. “When we were introduced to Sidekick, a powerful scanner for small offices, we knew that this could be the solution that we had been looking for.”

Sidekick is an all-in-one-box document imaging bundle from Böwe Bell + Howell Scanners. It includes a full color duplex scanner, a USB 2.0 cable



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for immediate plug and play connectivity, Kofax's Capio™ professional-grade scanning software and VirtualReScan (VRS) image enhancement technology. Gautcher believes that anyone who has any familiarity or even a basic comfort level with computers will find Sidekick easy to set up and operate. "The scanner box had everything we needed to get the system up and running," said Gautcher. "I was pleased that I could set up Sidekick by myself with an installation CD – in less than 15 minutes."

The scanner's compact size was important to the Scholarship Office. Sidekick fit easily on a desktop and was actually smaller than the office's laser printer. "The fact that we did not need to make any changes to our existing system or establish a separate imaging area is really convenient," said Gautcher.

The Sidekick 1400's size belies its capacity for speed and high image quality. The scanner has a feeder capacity of 120 pages and is capable of processing 43 pages per minute at 200 dpi. Though the Scholarship Office scans a maximum of 2,000 pages a day, the Sidekick's daily duty cycle is almost double that.

Streamlining Document Workflow

February 1 marked the application deadline for one of NIU's most meritorious awards. The Scholarship Office received more than 200 applications for the scholarship, and with a new imaging system, it was prepared to handle the challenges ahead.

"Students are encouraged to send in all required documents at one time, but sometimes the school policy or a teacher's comfort level may require them to send us those documents separately, to ensure privacy," explains Gautcher.

Instead of waiting until the Scholarship Office had received all the documents, the staff scanned and filed the documents as they came in. Scanned images made it very easy to later manipulate the sequence of the documents within each student's digital file.

Original submissions still had to be filed and stored as per university regulation, but now instead of photocopying 200 applications many times over, the Scholarship Office simply saved digital files of all the applications on CDs and delivered those to the review committee members. "Not seeing a pile of paper thrust before them came as a surprise to the committee," Gautcher said, "but pleasantly so."

Distributing copies of the scholarship applications to the review committee, a process that once took the Scholarship Office a full week, now takes little more than a day's worth of staff time overall.

Documents scanned by NIU's Scholarship Office are usually standard size, 8.5" x 11", but it does receive its share of non-standard documents such as certificates of achievement or visual artwork that students may include to showcase their creativity. Sidekick's built-in intelligence allows it to recognize and adapt to these variations without the need for constant modifications to its imaging settings. Switching from one-sided (simplex) to two-sided (duplex) scanning is also only a matter of noting the change on the PC's screen.

"The Scholarship office primarily scans in black and white, but the imaging system's ability to scan in color has turned out to be a useful feature, especially when students submit artwork. Reviewing committees that earlier were forced to judge a student's creativity based on a photocopy of submitted artwork can now view a high-quality color scan of the same submission and make a fairer determination."

Document Retrieval Made Easy

University policy requires the Scholarship Office to keep hard copies of certain documents in their office space for a period of five years. According to Gautcher, "Scanning documents that we don't need constant access to and sending the paper copies to NIU's archives can save a good amount of our limited file space and help us streamline our entire filing process."

The Sidekick scanner bundle has drastically reduced the hours that the Scholarship Office's staff has to invest in administrative activities. "I am now free from the photocopy machine and can divert my attention to projects that ordinarily get pushed back during peak scholarship seasons," said Gautcher. "And most importantly I am now more accessible to students, who are the lifeblood of our office."

On the NIU campus people resources can be scarce, but the Scholarship Office affectionately refers to Sidekick as its "new employee." Sidekick not only knows its job and does it right, but helps other members of the office do their jobs better too.



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