

Case study: Columbia College Chicago

Powering *decision-making* with accurate, accessible data

How Columbia College Chicago harnessed Interfolio's Lifecycle Management to support institution-wide planning amidst ongoing change.



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Introduction

Founded in 1890, Columbia College Chicago is a private non-profit institution with the mission to educate students who will author the culture of their times. Offering 40 undergraduate and graduate degree programs in the arts and communications, the institution is a cultural powerhouse serving more than 5,500 students and around 615 faculty members.

Faculty can take many different paths through their careers, and tracking these journeys in disconnected spreadsheets was a challenge for the institution. Every year, Jeffrey Grauel, Director of Faculty Evaluation, made a massive spreadsheet detailing its faculty members — and what was coming up for them during that year. “I would pull that all together, update it, parse it, send it out to the departments, and as soon as it landed in their inbox, it was probably not accurate anymore,” he said. “It was all a waste of everybody’s time.”

Grauel attended Interfolio’s annual conference with his then-supervisor and provost to learn about new features and best practices that could support their efforts at Columbia College Chicago. The institution was already using Interfolio’s Review, Promotion & Tenure (RPT) and Faculty Activity Reporting (FAR) modules, and when the concept of Lifecycle Management was debuted during the conference, they knew right away that they wanted to be part of the development process.

“We recognized the potential to influence software development for our needs if we got involved in the process early,” Grauel said. “As soon as we could, we jumped in and added Lifecycle Management to our suite of modules. It was going to be really helpful for folks who are making difficult decisions at a high level to know things about faculty composition.”

“To have a place for stakeholders to go in and see appointment histories and when faculty were evaluated — that’s going to be a huge boon,” added Grauel. “I was excited to enable administrators to just go and find the information themselves.”

Themes discussed:

- Simplicity and clarity from the start
- Enabling stakeholders to gather crucial details
- Navigating change in mere minutes

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Jeffrey Grauel

Director of Faculty Evaluation

Simplicity and clarity from the start

A set of authoritative documents detailing faculty rank types, evaluation and promotion timelines and workload expectations was key to the Lifecycle Management setup process at Columbia College Chicago. After investigating what was already being tracked — in spreadsheets, their existing homegrown system, and an HR system that was inaccessible to Grauel and his faculty affairs team — they collected data, noting overlaps and conflicts. These efforts helped the team in their journey to develop a dynamic source of truth for faculty careers.

With a clearer picture of what data existed and where, Grauel could start to shape the governance. “Early on, we decided we were going to control the data — that we’re not going to have a lot of hands in there,” he said. This was important not only for data quality but also for stakeholder buy-in. “We’ve learned that if there’s a system, such as the HR system, where we have information about the faculty that doesn’t concern them, they don’t take a lot of responsibility for keeping that updated, so it gets stale. We’re controlling the entry and the maintenance, but we want to have lots of people have access to see it.” Limiting hands-on access has enabled Grauel to set expectations about what Lifecycle Management is: a central truth of record that is a live document.

The initial setup was straightforward for Grauel, partly because of the sharp focus on priority information. The team was asked to select fields that they wanted to populate regarding faculty in the student information system. “We were shown all of the amazing possibilities, and our response was: only what is absolutely necessary,” Grauel recalled.

The team considered milestone events along the timeline, such as sabbatical or phased retirement. They also thought about how some information, such as office location, might move back and forth in order to decide where it could best be maintained. Having these details under control was vital to prevent the unintentional use of outdated information in external reporting.

Enabling stakeholders to gather crucial details

Grauel is often asked questions that may seem straightforward to his stakeholders but require a nuanced grasp of the data and a greater understanding of their ultimate goals. Lifecycle Management puts this information at Jeffrey’s fingertips. “I have deans and provosts in contract negotiations, asking me important questions that are going to change what they agreed to,” he said. But Grauel is also keen to ensure these leaders are confident working with the system directly.

With access to data that can inform their decisions, administrators can take action and feel confident in their conversations. They can recognize patterns in what is impacting faculty journeys and anticipate future reviews, ensuring that staffing is appropriate without delay.

For example, the seemingly simple question of “How many faculty do we have?” is actually complex to answer — and it often results in many follow-up questions. “There’s never one number,” Grauel said. “This information needs to exist at two levels: a good estimate of faculty year-to-year to enable comparisons, and specific moment-to-moment data to enable decision-making.”

“My goal is to never receive an email with a subject line ‘Faculty headcount.’ If administrators are in high-stakes negotiations, I don’t want them to have to wait for an answer,” said Grauel. “I want to make them comfortable enough to go in and be able to find that information on their own.”



Navigating change in mere minutes

This capability was tested when Columbia College Chicago faced a series of unfortunate events. The institution was experiencing a downturn in enrollment and a seven-week adjunct faculty union strike — the longest in U.S. history — which exacerbated an already difficult financial situation. This resulted in a simplified program array and a revised academic structure, from four schools with 16 departments, 14–16 chairs and four deans to eight schools, each with a director, no more chairs, no more departments and two deans.

“When I heard about this new structure and had a couple of months to implement it, I considered asking the Interfolio team if I could have the whole thing blown away, and if I could start from scratch,” Grauel said. Fortunately, he didn’t have to wipe the slate clean, thanks to two bulk edit options in Interfolio. “It took about five minutes,” he said. “Once I had the data that I needed, I didn’t have to blow anything away.”

Grauel was able to adapt quickly to provide seamless support to the institutional leaders who were making hard decisions, as well as the new managers who were trying to familiarize themselves with their teams. The institution now has a place where data updates can be made live, and managers can access the information when they need it. “I’m really confident that since we implemented Lifecycle Management, all that information is accurate and ready to go,” Grauel said.

This streamlined approach to managing faculty career journeys is beneficial for stakeholders across the institution, helping to save time while providing the ability to expand as needed. “Pulling up 30 different spreadsheets to answer one simple question is so frustrating for everyone involved,” noted Grauel. “I’m super excited to get rid of spreadsheets and put information into a place that will live on, that we continue to cultivate and add more information that really shows a full picture — especially of somebody’s career and where they’re going.”



About Interfolio

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