Helping Students Succeed: Scholarship Management for Grantmakers Using Salesforce

Overview

Modern scholarship management solutions can allow nonprofits to efficiently deliver funding to scholars, connect directly with financial aid partners, and track relationships with alumni. As such, these platforms are an attractive alternative to inflexible legacy systems where data is captured and held in isolation. The more sophisticated options can provide easy access to real-time data and valuable insights that the organization can leverage to meet not only their own needs, but also those of various stakeholders. Making the leap from siloed data to integrated and actionable data can be a game-changer for a nonprofit, especially when it is done so on an extensible platform that can meet the needs of other areas of the organization.

This white paper will examine common challenges faced by scholarship granting organizations, typical drivers that motivate a nonprofit to address these challenges, and two scholarship management solutions that can be built on the Salesforce platform.

Challenges Faced by Scholarship Grantmakers

There are a common set of challenges that are often faced by scholarship granting organizations, especially ones that were established years ago, before technology had started to rapidly evolve.

Inflexible, Often Custom-Built Legacy Systems

Many organizations turned to building their own software solutions to meet what they perceive to be needs and processes that are unique to their organization. Some nonprofits would hire their own developers, whereas others would engage software consultants and developers to build a custom-coded database, which would then need to be maintained and supported either by the organization itself or a third-party with in-depth knowledge of how the database functions. Any changes to something as simple as a field label may require the additional cost of hiring external resources to update code. Plus, a simple code change could have additional, unintended effects in other parts of the system. This lack of flexibility and inherent constraints can be limiting for an organization, and force it to manage some scholarship-related parallel processes outside of the solution.

Data Siloed Across Multiple Systems

Depending on how an organization is structured, multiple systems may be required to support different stages of the scholarship management process. Oftentimes these solutions are not integrated, creating data silos across the organization, and making it difficult to manage risks as there isn't a holistic view of a student's situation. In such cases, data may need to be exported from one solution and imported into another one in order to achieve an objective. Such manual processes can not only be time-consuming, but they also introduce the likelihood of human error when data is being re-keyed.

Depending on the systems in place, it may be possible for an organization to integrate the solutions, but such integration would have financial implications, and might not allow for the real-time exchange of data. Such a lag in data exchange can be problematic as administrators do not have an accurate view into information related to a scholarship application, disbursement, or renewal.

Risk Management Gaps

Tied closely to data silos is an organization's ability to manage risks proactively. When data is housed in different systems, it can be challenging to gain a holistic view of each scholar. For example, if a particular scholar's award is tied to a grade point average, attendance, or other achievement, then the nonprofit needs visibility into this data in order to mitigate risks and ensure that the scholar gets back on track if they are beginning to falter.

Manual, Offline Calculations

Many variables influence the amount calculated for a scholarship award. Calculations can be challenging as they require the latest information from various sources. When such calculations are completed manually, offline, there is an increased likelihood for human error and the lack of data integration across systems also creates delays.

Paper-Based Processes for Signatures and Authorizations

At different stages of the scholarship management process, signatures and authorizations are required from various parties, many of whom are geographically dispersed. In 2020, this particular challenge was exacerbated by the pandemic as offices were closed and staff worked remotely from home. When data is not integrated, the paperwork that must be signed may have to be manually prepared outside of the system where the data is housed. Once again, this introduces the possibility for human error, not to mention an increase in time required to produce and process the paperwork.

Email or Postal Mail-Based Communication When Students Would Prefer to Interact via Mobile

Many scholarship organizations rely heavily on email or postal mail-based communications when reaching out to students. Such methods may be the easiest way for an organization to manage outbound communications, especially when limited by functionality of their custom-built solutions. However, they can leave the impression that the organization is behind the times as such channels are not the preferred ones of students and scholars who have demonstrated a strong preference to interact with organizations via their mobile phone.

Photos: Big Shoulders Fund, The Ford Family Foundation, Rawpixel.

Evaluating Scholarship Management Solutions

The desire to replace a legacy scholarship management solution with a more modern, sophisticated one can be motivated by several drivers.

Need for More Control and Independence

Many nonprofits often lack the in-house expertise of custom software developers, which leaves nonprofit staff reliant on external resources for changes or access such as importing/exporting data. A desire to have more control and independence is often a motivating factor for implementing a user-friendly solution that doesn't require coding skills for basic changes once it is live.

Furthermore, empowering staff to be more hands-on can improve efficiency when it comes to accessing data and making changes. The ability to make changes without engaging external resources is also attractive from a budgetary perspective, especially as nonprofits face mounting economic uncertainty, requiring leaders to cut costs wherever possible.

Desire to Integrate Data with Other Solutions

As organizations turn to technology to automate processes and increase efficiency, they often need to integrate data across solutions, achieving a single source of truth as opposed to having disparate systems with siloed information. For example, many nonprofits host events—in-person or online—for their scholarship applicants, and often manage the related invitee information in an events management tool. The ability to integrate the data from such a solution directly to an individual's record can provide a more complete picture of the individual's interactions with the organization, and can also allow the organization to remind the student about upcoming events during a conversation about another matter.

Additionally, planning for future growth requires the organization to be forward-thinking in terms of how they will manage and integrate their data across solutions in the future. These immediate and longer term plans can lead an organization to search for a flexible and scalable solution that can be extended beyond scholarship management to include other areas, such as grants management and fundraising, depending on the organization.

Increase Efficiencies for All Users

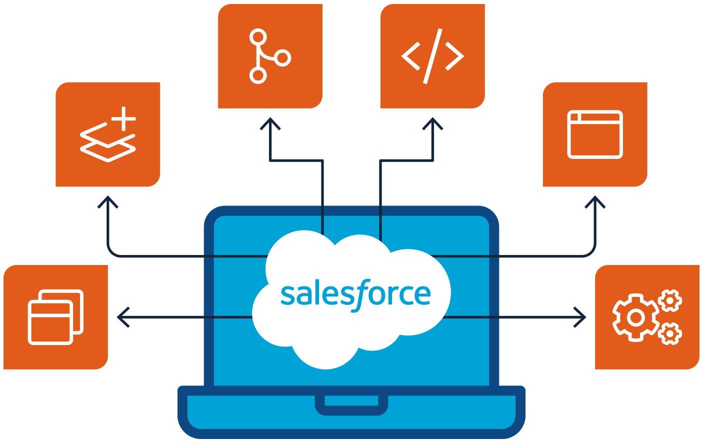
When staff have to go back-and-forth between systems in order to access the data that they need to do their day-to-day jobs, they are less efficient. Moreover, if a staff member has to contact a colleague in order to gain access to the information they require, there can be delays.

Staff aren't the only users of scholarship management solutions. Other stakeholders, including financial aid partners, applicants, selected scholars, and mentors also require varying levels of access to relevant data, forms, and reports. The diverse needs of these different users create an opportunity to increase efficiency by centralizing data in a single location, where it can be easily accessed, on-demand, from anywhere.

Requirements Provided by Schools

Sometimes the requirements of schools can be a primary driver behind an organization's need to replace their legacy scholarship management solution with a more modern, accessible system. In some cases, for example, a school might request the ability to complete batch uploads of student information, rather than adding the data manually, one student at a time. This underlying desire for increased efficiency and streamlined processes can benefit both the schools as well as the nonprofit, not to mention the students and scholars as well.

Scholarship Management Solutions Using Salesforce



Over 15 years ago, Exponent Partners chose the Salesforce platform for its nonprofit clients for several key reasons: flexibility, sustainability, and unparalleled technology. Users of Salesforce are able to take advantage of unprecedented reliability and core features, like mobile access, analytics, and a streamlined user experience. When it comes to scholarship management, organizations benefit not only from having a single source of truth in Salesforce, but also from the ability to efficiently deliver funding to scholars, connect with university partners and mentors, and track relationships with alumni.

As an organization grows, the Salesforce platform scales, offering the ability to flexibly add functionality that meets the nonprofit's evolving needs. Depending on grantmaker requirements and program complexity, organizations can expand their scholarship management with Salesforce modules as well as third-party apps on the Salesforce AppExchange. Nonprofits can choose from a variety of quality form builder apps for online applications to securely collect applicant information and integrate that data with Salesforce. In addition to a combination of third-party apps, some organizations may benefit from Salesforce Experience Cloud (formerly Community Cloud), a branded portal where users across all stakeholder groups— applicants, reviewers, employees, and partners—have direct, self-serve access to relevant data in Salesforce.

One of the many benefits of the Salesforce platform is its ability to be extended well beyond scholarships to include the management of relationships with other constituents and service the needs of other departments, including finance, fundraising, and grants management. This same flexibility enables the Salesforce platform to serve the diverse requirements of nonprofits of different sizes and with different budgets.

When Exponent Partners evaluates an organization's requirements related to scholarship management, various factors can come into play. Important considerations include budget (both for the implementation and for ongoing Salesforce licenses), timeline, and the access needs of various stakeholders.

Streamlined Data Collection with Third-Party Form Apps

Various types of form solutions are available through the Salesforce AppExchange, and can be used to meet the basic needs of a scholarship organization. FormAssembly is one of the leading web form platforms, but other form solutions based on Salesforce can also be used for scholarship management.

An organization that is simply looking to collect data via an online form that integrates directly into Salesforce would be a great fit for a form tool. This option is also appealing when there is a tight timeline for launch, and a limited budget for implementation and ongoing licenses.

The use of a form is perfect when the focus is on one-time collection of data from an individual and a limited internal audience will be reviewing the data collected. In such cases, an organization's business processes are typically relatively simple and straightforward. For example, if the selection process only involves individuals from within the organization, all of whom have a Salesforce license, then using a form solution will work well.

The limitations of using only forms are primarily that usage is tied to a limited internal audience that would have access to the data collected. However, as a nonprofit grows and their needs evolve over time, the form can be integrated into a series of more advanced processes and workflows that are managed on the Salesforce platform through Salesforce Experience Cloud.

Case in Point: Big Shoulders Fund

Challenges

- **Scholarship applications managed using spreadsheets and paper applications.** Big Shoulders Fund was using a manual system of spreadsheets and paper applications to receive and award approximately 5,000 scholarships to students annually. These labor-intensive efforts meant staff spent a significant amount of time completing data entry. Moreover, the amount of manual effort involved made human error more likely.
- **Limited reporting capabilities for both scholarships and donor management.** The organization wanted to move towards a more effective data management and reporting solution. The data was housed in multiple places, making it difficult and time-consuming to create reports, and the organization wanted to more efficiently collect additional data points. As a result, the organization was challenged to create meaningful metrics that they could easily track.

Solution

- **Big Shoulders Fund Scholarship Program:** Big Shoulders Fund selected Salesforce in early 2016 as a solution to its challenges related to processing and tracking thousands of student scholarship applications received from 75 schools annually. The system was also configured to receive and award approximately 5,000 scholarships to new and returning students annually.

- **Tax Credit Scholarship Program:** When Big Shoulders Fund was approved as a Scholarship Granting Organization (SGO) in 2017, the nonprofit quickly identified Salesforce as the best tool to facilitate the related processes under the Illinois Invest in Kids Act. With only two months to launch, the application was created in-house using FormAssembly, a form building platform designed for Salesforce. Then Big Shoulders Fund engaged Exponent Partners to configure the organization's Salesforce instance to allow for the capture of required data using processes that followed State-mandated rules.

Highlights of Results

Simplified processes for scholarship applications led to YOY increases

289% increase in applications received, 93% increase in scholarship funds requested, 60% increase in scholarship funds awarded

Enhanced ability to handle large volumes of applications in short timeframes

Year 1: Processed 6,000 applications in the first hour; Year 2: Processed 6,000 applications in the first 9 minutes

Automated processes translate to savings in both time and money

Over 4 years, have saved 30,000 hours of staff time and significant personnel costs due to automation

Read the full case study on Big Shoulders Fund's use of Salesforce.

Photos: Big Shoulders Fund, The Ford Family Foundation, Rawpixel.

Self-Serve Data Management with Salesforce Experience Cloud

Salesforce Experience Cloud is well suited for an organization that needs a custom interface, and has ongoing engagement with various stakeholders, as well as more complex business processes. For example, perhaps there needs to be numerous interactions with scholarship recipients to collect information such as letters of recommendation, transcripts, and renewal paperwork over an extended period of time. Another use case might be the need for external reviewers to read applications and enter scores as part of the selection process. Or perhaps a financial aid partner needs an efficient way to access and share confidential data about an individual before, during, or after the selection process is complete. In all of the aforementioned cases, Salesforce Experience Cloud is a comprehensive option that is well suited to support the diverse needs of stakeholders, in addition to an organization's more complex processes related to scholarship management.

Salesforce Experience Cloud can serve as one of several building blocks within the Salesforce platform, where other apps can be added to meet the diverse needs of different departments within the nonprofit, such as grants management and fundraising. For example, the application process itself could potentially be built in Salesforce, and both grants management and fundraising could be handled in Salesforce as well at a later date.

Case in Point: The Ford Family Foundation

Challenges

- **Had an outdated Access database that was no longer meeting the organization's needs.** The Ford Family Foundation had started to use an Access database for scholarship management more than 25 years ago. Over time, they had added to the solution, but it was no longer sophisticated enough to support the nonprofit's growing number of programs or its desire to conduct more in-depth data analysis. It was challenging to export data from the solution to create reports. Additionally, the nature of the software's design meant that a limited number of staff had mastered its nuances, creating risks from a succession-planning perspective.

- **Used separate Access databases for scholarship selection and for information on friends of the foundation.** Since the organization didn't want to bring every applicant into their database of record—only those awarded—a separate Access database was created and maintained for that purpose.

Awarded and active Scholars were managed in the main Access database serving as a CRM. A third database was used to track friends of the foundation, who included reviewers, interviewers, and board members. As alumni became reviewers, they would have records in multiple databases, but there was no single view of all their history and connections with the foundation. Additionally, if there was a change in information for an alumnus, such as a new address, then that change would need to be made in multiple places.

- **Needed to increase efficiency and track student progress in one place.** With a need to track retention of students and their graduation rates, while also providing wraparound support, such as academic and career counseling, The Ford Family Foundation wanted a single source of truth that would also give them an at-a-glance view of each scholar. Measuring engagement of alumni was also of interest, but difficult to achieve.

- **Couldn't access real-time data in a timely manner.** Although all data was accessible, it took a lot of time and many steps to access it, making even basic tasks challenging. The multi-step process made it difficult for staff to access data in real-time. For example, when a scholarship recipient called, it wasn't easy for the foundation to quickly see in one place the situational, financial, and academic status of that student. As a result, it was difficult for staff to easily see how a student was doing, and then proactively provide wraparound services if the student was deemed to be at-risk. There was a clear opportunity to increase graduation rates of scholarship recipients with better access to real-time data.

- **Managed many back-end processes on paper.** Most forms were completed by students online, but the organization's back-end processes were paper-based, so forms were printed and added to a paper file. "We relied heavily on paper and physical document shuffling," explained Ashley Potter, Scholarship Programs Manager at The Ford Family Foundation. "When paperwork would get stuck in somebody's office, it might not be visible to others where it was in the process. The ability to access data from anywhere, via the Cloud, has given us the flexibility that we need, whether we're working from the office, the field, or home."
- **Completed manual calculations of awards.** With the foundation providing support that is 90 percent of unmet needs, every time a student receives additional financial aid, staff must adjust the awards and calculate accordingly. The calculation and tracking of awards, as well as the communication with partners, were cumbersome. As for financial aid partners, they needed the ability to access their students' records on their end, and to also be able to manually key in the budget for each student. This manual process introduced the possibility of human error into the scholarship management process.

Solution

The Ford Family Foundation was looking for a flexible and configurable solution that would serve them for the next 25 years, in anticipation of the organization's continued growth and need for a scalable infrastructure. It was also important that the solution had the ability to integrate with other systems, such as ones for managing events or alumni networks, as well as the potential for broader usage across the office. In terms of specific features and functionality, there was the need to track risks and actions taken in a structured format, implement a risk-weighting system, and auto-generate risks based on scholar or university administrator inputs.

Having a Cloud-based solution was important to the organization as it would make students' information more easily accessible from anywhere—the office, the field, or home.

The nonprofit decided to transition their recipient database, where they managed all their scholar data, and replace it with Salesforce Experience Cloud, while also leveraging FormAssembly to host all forms, including applications for graduate funding, renewals, and mentor programs.

Exponent Partners was selected to lead the implementation of Salesforce Experience Cloud. "Exponent Partners stood out because of their unique experience working in the nonprofit sector, as well as their experience working with foundations and philanthropy," stated Denise Callahan, Director of Postsecondary Success at The Ford Family Foundation. "During their presentation, Exponent Partners demonstrated an in-depth understanding of the challenges that we face and how they could be addressed using the Salesforce platform."

Highlights of Results

The process to implement Salesforce Experience Cloud exceeded the expectations of The Ford Family Foundation. "We've done other projects on other implementations, but this one was different," explained Denise, "Exponent Partners' project management, the personal connections, and the investment in the relationship all made it a really great experience. It was on-time, well managed, and we especially appreciated the willingness to push us to stretch and think differently about our existing processes and possible improvements. In the end, we got a wonderful system and the process to get there helped us analyze how we do things and determine ways to do them better."

- **Automated processes to award scholarships.** Salesforce Experience Cloud has improved the exchange of information between the foundation and its financial aid partners, automating the calculation and tracking of awards, as well as communications with financial aid partners. Partners also have access to the portal, where they can access their students' records.
- The ability for financial aid partners to do bulk uploads of their budgets has proven to be a massive time-saver, especially for one school that can now submit 140 budgets in 20 seconds as opposed to the many hours that it would have taken in the foundation's legacy system. By removing manual keying of data from this particular process, the possibility of human error is virtually eliminated. Moving forward, the foundation plans to leverage this same bulk upload functionality to automate a similar process related to updating grades for each student.
- **Added risk indicators based on data points collected.** The implementation of Salesforce Experience Cloud has enabled the foundation to take data points that they capture about

students on a regular basis, and feed those into an algorithm that provides a status of red, yellow or green for how a student is doing on three risk indicators: academic (e.g., GPA and credits, high school GPA, enrollment in community college), financial (e.g., expected family contribution), and situational. This valuable information can be used to prioritize services provided to students, based on their most pressing needs. As a result, reporting and scholar intervention has improved, which has in turn resulted in greater impact through higher graduation rates.

“Salesforce has made us more agile and has given us the ability to take a lot of information about students and how they are doing, so that we can better assess and prioritize to whom and how we need to provide wraparound services.”

– Denise Callahan, Director of Postsecondary Success, The Ford Family Foundation

- **Enhanced student communications.** Although from a student’s perspective, the experience to access information is largely the same, the foundation is now able to easily share information with individual students via the portal. “Salesforce Experience Cloud has allowed us to have more streamlined communications and do more in terms of reminders, while providing students with a one-stop shop for everything they need to do,” explained Ashley. “The portal looks nicer, and the UI is much cleaner and simplified, making it more relevant to how students are used to working with technology today.”

- **Strengthened the organization’s student-centric approach:** With the help of Exponent Partners, The Ford Family Foundation was able to structure Salesforce Experience Cloud in a way that gives staff and other stakeholders improved access to information that can then be used to better serve students. “Salesforce has made us more agile and has given us the ability to take a lot of information about students and how they are doing, so that we can better assess and prioritize to whom and how we need to provide wraparound services,” explained Denise.

  “For example, every year we do a renewal of all our current scholars. As part of every one of those renewals, we ask several questions and there are certain data fields in that renewal that will trigger a notification or that will change the risk indicator. One of the things we used to run into was hundreds of renewals coming in, and we had to manually look through all of them to see if a student was struggling. We can now identify and prioritize the most immediate needs. It has also helped us to divide up the workload more equitably amongst staff.”

- **Streamlined approval processes:** Salesforce Communities was configured in a way that has simplified approval processes, moving them from paper that was housed in physical files to electronic versions that can then be easily added to a scholar’s online record. This improved workflow has also made it much faster for staff and stakeholders to access the information they need, which has proven to be especially helpful as working from home becomes more common.

Looking Ahead

For organizations that need to implement or replace an existing scholarship management solution, Salesforce provides a flexible and extensible platform. Nonprofits of any size can benefit from a scholarship management solution, regardless of the level of complexity of their business processes. The Salesforce platform and its marketplace of third-party apps continues to evolve. In addition to the Experience Cloud feature development, Salesforce products such as Accounting Subledger combined with Outbound Funds Module can work to better integrate program and finance operations.

Learn more about how Exponent Partners could help your organization with its scholarship management needs.
Check out the webinar featuring The Ford Family Foundation and contact us today.

About Exponent Partners

Founded in 2005 as a social venture, Exponent Partners is a mission-based consulting firm with a vision of strengthening the nonprofit sector through technology solutions. As a Salesforce.Org Premium Partner, Exponent Partners offers a whole agency approach to help Philanthropic, Human Services, and Education organizations capture all their business processes and constituent relationship management needs in one system—from program management to fundraising to communications to outcomes, and more.

Technology for social change can enable organizations to improve their performance and advance their mission. Core to our theory of change, we believe our solutions support the outcomes-focused management that drives the nonprofit sector forward. We have served 700+ clients and implemented 1,600+ technology projects since the first days of the Salesforce nonprofit community.

Exponent Partners provides strategic consulting and implementation services for organizations of all sizes, from small local nonprofits to large multinational organizations. Our expertise includes all Salesforce products including the Nonprofit Success Pack (NPSP) and Pardot, as well as third party apps. Based on our advanced knowledge working with Human Service organizations, we developed Exponent Case Management (ECM), a highly configurable app on the Salesforce AppExchange which provides comprehensive case management functionality to accommodate any type of program.

Headquartered in San Francisco, CA, Exponent Partners has staff located in New York, Seattle, Washington D.C., and across the country. Over two-thirds of our staff hails from nonprofits, and collectively hold 60+ separate Salesforce certifications which ensure you receive the highest level of expertise. We have a skilled team that comprises a complete set of roles including strategy consultants, business analysts, technical architects, Salesforce specialists, software developers and project managers.

As a Certified B Corporation and California Benefit Corporation, Exponent Partners voluntarily meets rigorous standards of social and environmental performance, transparency, and accountability in pursuit of our social mission.