

Albion College

Holding Out for the Best

U.Commerce[®], PayPath[®] Worth the Wait for Small Michigan College

- Albion, Michigan
- Private liberal arts college
- Founded: 1835
- Enrollment: 1,700
- Featured TouchNet technology: U.Commerce[®] (Payment Gateway, Bill+Payment, Cashiering), PayPath[®] Convenience Fee Service



The rest of the country may not be able to find Albion College on a map, and probably doesn't know that it offers some of the best pre-med, pre-law and business management programs available. In the state of Michigan, however, the college of 1,700 students enjoys elite status.

"We're sort of considered Ivy League here in the Midwest," said Tom Pitt, an Albion alum and the college's current accounting manager. "Our students and parents demand the best."

After several years in the works, Albion has a campus commerce system worthy of the school's lofty reputation.

Persistence Pays

Pitt came to the job in 1998 with visions of automating and streamlining the business office through technology. His prior superiors didn't necessarily share that vision. Nonetheless, he kept alive a relationship with TouchNet he estab-

lished in 2002, when Albion converted to an ERP system.

"I was always impressed with TouchNet's products and thought how great it would be to have them on our campus," he said. Five years and three bosses later, Pitt finally had one that agreed. "He recognized we needed to deliver a better product to remain competitive. Until that point (2009), we had no mechanism for taking online payments."

It may have taken a while to pull the trigger, but Albion got TouchNet's U.Commerce up and running in no time, and the benefits were immediate.

Open All the Time

Albion introduced online bill payment in fall 2009. Thanks to a significant communications and education effort, adoption reached approximately 50 percent. The next semester marked the end of paper billing at Albion, adoption was 100 percent, and

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Authorized Users were on two out of three student accounts.

"There was some pushback from a small minority, but most people said, 'It's about time,'" Pitt said.

His staff probably thought the same thing. There were no more lines of students and backed-up phone lines to deal with twice per year. No more backlogging of normal work in order to work the payment windows. No more manual updating of student accounts. Payments are now made on the students'/parents' time and processed immediately, and student accounts are updated in real time.

"Bill+Payment eliminated the need for four staff members to devote a full day to sorting, folding and stuffing envelopes," Pitt said. "Add to that the savings on printing and postage, which is about \$60,000 per year."

Pitt anticipates even greater savings as more refund-eligible students enroll in eRefunds. Refunds go straight from the school's account to the student's designated bank account via ACH. Again, goodbye lines and hello improved customer service. Plus, Albion avoids the need for another vendor and maintains control of the money (and earns the interest) prior to disbursement.

Convenient Cost-Cutting

Before implementing TouchNet PayPath Convenience Fee Service, Albion took as much as a quarter-million-dollar hit on credit card merchant fees in a year. It took less than one year to eliminate a majority of them.

"Our board of trustees said in no uncertain terms that we could no longer incur that cost of doing business," he said. "That's when

we decided to go with PayPath, which saved more than \$170,000 in the first year alone, and more than paid for our entire TouchNet investment by itself."

Naturally, credit card payments for tuition and fees trended downward, and the number of paper and electronic checks increased, including those for in-person transactions. Streamlining the check-handling process was the main reason Albion purchased TouchNet Cashiering in the first place, Pitt said, and the more paper checks it converts to ACH, the more it shines.

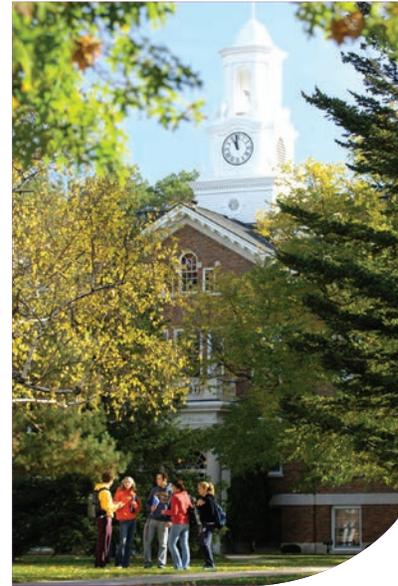
"When we implemented Cashiering, we experienced something totally new: the ability to process all mailed checks the day we receive them," Pitt said. "In the first semester alone, we processed \$4 million in eChecks and cut our check-handling expenses by one-third. We also improved our cash flow and the ability to make cash predictions."

Sanity and Security

As many small-college business offices can relate, Albion doesn't have dedicated staff for cashiering, PCI compliance and other specialized areas of focus. And like business offices throughout Higher Education, they're asked to do more with less.

"I'm at bare bones with staffing. I can't get by with any fewer positions," Pitt said. "TouchNet allows us to focus more on taking care of internal and external constituents and less on payment processing and compliance."

Because the software is hosted at the



TouchNet Certified DataCenter, there is also less need for IT support. "Another thing TouchNet simplified for us is data storage and security," Pitt added. "There are still things we're responsible for, but TouchNet mitigates the burden significantly."

As much as TouchNet has lightened the load on the business office, Pitt said the customer service gains are equally valuable. "I think a lot of small school financial officers believe they can't afford a system like this. Some may think our students and parents don't need or want it," he said. "In fact, they have the same demands as students at big schools. For our customers, I want the best product out there. We have it in TouchNet." ●

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