Jana Walser-Smith, Director SAN:

Hello everyone, and welcome. I'm Jana Walser-Smith, director of Interstate Compliance and Member Outreach here at the State Authorization Network, or SAN. And today, I'm so excited that we have the pleasure of welcoming Mr. Ramsey Itani from Rio Salado College, RSC, located in Tempe, Arizona. RSC is the 2024 recipient of a sensational award in the category of compliance innovation. RSC dazzled the awards committee with their project titled College Compliance Calendar Tool: Free Accountability for Us All. But before I get into the details of the RSC project, please allow me the latitude to explain a little bit about the sensational awards. We just like for you to keep in mind that these awards were born in 2015 as an annual award to recognize the outstanding efforts by our members and institutions, organizations who have always been friends of SAN. These institutions have been very innovative as they have developed high quality and comprehensive solutions to challenging distance education compliance issues.

So in that vein, SAN now applauds, we celebrate the creativity and the vision of these institutions, of these organizations when they are helping to show us to lead the way to address some of these regulatory issues. These projects that we review for the sensational awards underscore the fact that these institutions, these organizations not only understand the state and federal regulations and the regulatory requirements, but they have also conceptualized and put into effect processes on their respective campuses that mobilize their campus, mobilize their communications, and have developed procedures designed to support learners. So it is in that vein, and without further ado, I introduce you all to Mr. Ramsey Itani Ramsey, you have the floor.

Ramsey Itani:

Thanks, Jana. Thanks everybody for having me. We're excited to be here and talk about our college compliance calendar tool that we developed, so we'll get started. So our topics that we'll be talking about today, we'll give you a brief overview of Rio Salado College, who we are, how we serve our students. We'll look at the history of our compliance calendar within Rio, and then also thinking about the revision process of what we went through to make this. We'll also talk about our stakeholders because that's really important about who is it and what they need as we develop this process. And then we'll go through the nitty gritty of how this actually works and if you are choosing to implement something similar at your institution, how you might be able to do that. And then we can go through some question and answers. So Rio Salado College, as Jana mentioned, is in Tempe, Arizona, bright sunny Arizona, and we were established in 1978 as a college without walls really to serve non-traditional students.

And we began offering online courses in 1996. Let me repeat that, 1996. So we were ahead of the curve in terms of really thinking about distance learning and how we were able to support our students remotely. So we're part of the Maricopa Community College District comprising 10 independently accredited colleges through the Higher Learning Commission. So we have a large district, I believe one of the largest in the country, and we offer 650, over 650 online courses with over 140 degree programs and certificates, serving roughly 40,000 students in Arizona and across the United States and some internationally as well. What's unique about Rio is that we have a model where we have 40 plus start dates a year. And so it gives students the ability to really think about when they can start. And we can serve those non-traditional students as they get ready to start, whether they're in an employer tuition assistance program, or whether they're a dual enrollment student and where they are in really their education journey.

So Rio has a lot of employees, over a thousand adjunct faculty. We have 25 residential full-time faculty. We have over 500 full-time employees and almost 400 part-time employees. So that's a really large footprint for us for an online primarily institution. And we have over 30 years of developing partnerships with local communities within the valley, and even national communities and partnerships throughout the country as we think about articulation agreements and helping students pursue their education in education deserts that might not serve those students. So we also have the largest dual enrollment population in Arizona, roughly 9,500 students. So those students that are in high school that we can serve them through getting credit in high school towards their education is really an important thing for us to help develop learners throughout that to be more successful as they lead into college. We are also the largest provider of adult education in Arizona, serving more than 6,000 adult learners annually.

And we were recently recognized as the first community college in Arizona to have a student earn and be awarded their bachelor's degree from a community college, and that was thanks to some recent legislation that was passed in our state so that community colleges could offer bachelor's degrees. So we're very proud of those things. And you can see the Saguaro cactus. As everybody thinks of in Arizona, it's this desolate, barren plane. Well, no, it actually has tons of mountains and is actually one of the most diverse ecosystems around with thousands of different species of plants and animals. So we have in a very diverse environment and we serve a very diverse student population. So I'll give you a little history about our compliance calendar. So initially, our compliance calendar was developed in mid 2015. It was just a list of compliance items like most campuses have where they help maintain those requirements from the regulatory triad, from state, regional accreditors, and the Department of Education.

And so as you can see this screenshot, it has a view of what the old system looked like. And anybody who's worked with SharePoint might know that SharePoint sites are somewhat cumbersome. They don't necessarily have all the information at one spot. And so it created some challenges for us over time in terms of how users were able to use the system, navigate the system, and how to access it. And we'll go through some of those challenges and what brought us to this point in the next slide. But ultimately what led to this work was that migrations of SharePoint sites go to different servers. And because we're in such a large district, those were getting migrated to a district server. And we wanted control of our operations. We didn't want someone else to have ownership of this. We like to take accountability for those things. So we'll talk a little bit about what the challenges were faced from an old system perspective and what we used in that to help develop a new one.

So the old SharePoint list was difficult for an administrator to manage because you need to have some experience, one, working on SharePoint sites, but also you have to have the right developer software installed on your computer so that you can make adjustments to the workflow and how that operates. And it's really difficult to have any sort of automation or communication in place that helps notify users or points of contact, what's due, who's doing what. And we were ultimately reliant on IT staff to do a lot of these things to repopulate a list of thousand items a year. All these things you have to do ended up causing data errors, duplicate records, things that were not populated that should have been, and who was doing it was a hard thing to manage too because access was a constant challenge. We had... As many institutions have, the staff move positions, they get either promoted or they move to a different department, and the administrator didn't have access to really update this in a timely manner.

And really what we thought about is who is using this and where are they using this as we live in age now where people are working remotely, and if you needed to be logged into a computer on campus or a virtual private network, or VPN, those were some of the things we thought about, is could somebody access a new system anywhere as opposed to having to have their bottom in a seat at their desk in their office to do their work? So the way that we went about this process, probably like any others when we think about process improvement, is we thought about who's using this tool and what their needs are.

So we identified the stakeholders, and we talked to them and we said, what would help us better serve your needs as a department so that you can manage your compliance?

And then thinking about brainstorming solutions on the technology that we had, how could we leverage the systems that we already had? And with cost in mind. Because as everyone thinks about the enrollment and the funding for their colleges and how they can use money in a fiscally responsible way, we wanted to think about those things too. So we identified the systems we have, and then really thought about, okay, the stakeholders have their functionality needs. Let's develop some specifications on how we can develop a process that's going to meet the needs of the staff and the institution, but also ultimately the administrator, or me, who's going to be using this system to help facilitate all these different moving pieces. So we formed a small group of super users once we developed some ideas and thought about, okay, give us some feedback on testing this idea. So we came up with an idea of using a Google page integration in terms of, okay, everybody at our institution knows how to use Google for the most part.

We've been using it for quite some time. And we then took their feedback into consideration as we started revising this prototype. And as we revised this prototype, we kept testing and understanding what worked, what didn't work so that we could create documentation as we went through this process. So the ultimate thing that I want to emphasize that I've been doing is developing a standard operating procedure for users and for an administrator so that we have a succession plan in place. And I know from a state authorization network, succession planning was a big thing we focused on, and I'll thank the state authorization network as I went to a succession planning, we'll say toolkit session, and it really sparked an interest on making sure we had clear documentation so that somebody else could step into my role as I go on and they could do the same things without any trouble.

So once we created some of this documentation, we then conducted some trainings on how we're going to be using this tool and went through the resources so that we would record those, so that we would have a legacy of understanding what we could reference. If people then came on to new positions, we could reference the training and not having to duplicate these trainings all the time for new users. Ultimately, we were able to then implement this at a very key time when we also then migrated a Drupal website system from Drupal eight to a Drupal nine, which was a large project in itself, covering the entire college. So we were able to integrate these needs into a compliance calendar and also roll out a new calendar at the same time so people had experience using this across the college rather than just a really small cohort of staff. And we ultimately follow a PDCA cycle, which is the Plan, Do, Check, Act process where we look at things from a process improvement perspective.

We don't just implement something and let it go. We're constantly evaluating this to understand how we can then improve. And we check our work, and then we make action on that to keep process improvement moving. So our stakeholders, these are the things that we talk about when we look at the process from a user experience, and also from an administrator perspective. So we looked at who the users are that are going into the system and what's going to make it easy for them to use. If you don't have a system that's easy to use, most likely people are not going to use it and they're going to rely on somebody else to walk them through this process. So we thought about that in mind and said, if somebody needs to delegate work to somebody else, could they do that? Right? Because access is key. And if somebody's able to delegate work to somebody else, that was a key function that we thought about.

We also thought about what happens when somebody has technology issues, not that we hope they do, but that if they ever encounter issue, are they able to fix it themselves or do they have to rely on an IT professional or some sort of service desk? And so we thought about, okay, could a user fix something? And we brought that into consideration. And then we talked about this a little earlier, which is, where can this user access the system? We don't want it to be housed on a virtual private network. We want it to be accessible if they were able to get in just by using their credentials that they would log in to work from a remote computer at home. And then we really think about transparency with compliance because we want to understand, one, what's going on, when is it due, and who's doing it? Right? And then after the fact of who did it, and when did they do it, and what they did.

So this helps us create a repository of all those things so that if any case comes in where we missed something, we understand how to identify where we missed it and fix that issue moving forward. And then we talked about this too, is technology backgrounds in terms of managing this compliance calendar and how to authenticate user access and still keep it secure, but be able to have someone that doesn't have IT background to come in and be able to manage this calendar. So that was some really important points that we thought about as we developed this tool.

So we'll talk about how this tool works, which is fun for me because I helped develop all this. So the system administrator for this tool is my position, which is the director for Institutional integrity and compliance. And we maintain a master listing of all the tasks that are associated with our compliance objectives throughout the institution, whether it be the Department of Education, Higher Education Opportunity Act disclosures, state authorization, and getting state authorization for professional licensure programs, how to research those programs and when to do that, as well as links out to our state boards and all the resources that we have internally. So these things all bring together all those resources in a master sheet. So each January, this master list is repopulated based off of the last three or four years of data, and we determine the changes based off of regulatory change and negotiated rulemaking.

We even put in things in our calendar that might come to fruition. For example, we put in gainful employment in 2023 and we said, "Hey, this is going to be a thing probably." We also put in transcript withholding. We said, "This is probably going to be a thing." So we put these things in there as a dashboard for us to keep an eye and our fingers on the pulse of what's going on. And then what we'll do is we'll go through and audit the access to the system and say, "Do these people still work here? Do these people still have this responsibility for these items that are needed?" Because we manage our compliance from a shared governance perspective so that it's not all reliant on one person to do everything. And I hope other institutions kind of follow the same suit of understanding who's responsible and can be the subject matter experts for these. And we rely on our subject matter experts to really understand what's going on in their department, their divisions, their specialized accreditation if it's, for example, a dental program and what CODA has done to do recent visits.

So we really think about those things as we're understanding how to manage the system from an administrator perspective. So the thing that works really well with this is we have our master listing sheet which controls access and pushes data to the point of contact dashboard. So each point of contact has their own user dashboard, and this helps limit access, one, from a confidentiality perspective, but also from just a management perspective. If you go into a SharePoint list and you see 100 items that are in there, trying to find out which ones belong to you can be challenging. And it also is difficult to find out what you need to do and when. So each user will have their dashboard that belongs to them forever, and the administrator sheet pushes information to the dashboard. And anytime a user updates their dashboard based off of items being completed, it then pushes information back to the administrator sheet so that that way, we have a centralized way to report off of what was done, what hasn't been done, what's overdue, and what's coming up.

So the first thing that our users do is they authenticate their access. And we have a master point of contact template page that will run a script. And what the script does, it creates their own Google dashboard and they will click on this create my view button, which will then send them an authorization, and it will ask them, do you authorize this based off of your employee credentials? And what that will do is it will then go through a script and it will show them their dashboard, and it'll send them an email to themselves, which sounds funny, but they're actually authorizing their own access after the administrator does this on the back end. And you can see on here that we also have a little compliance at a glance graph that shows how we're doing in terms of things that are in process, things that have been completed, and those that are past the deadlines.

And then we created a resource guide over here on the right hand side for their dashboard that has a compliance calendar tip sheet if they ever get stuck in terms of how to fix something. We have videos on how to authenticate their access in case they get stuck. And we have links to important things like the code of federal regulations, our Arizona revised statutes in our state, as well as our district administration and our common page regulations that impact all of our operations as a district.

So here's what I was talking about, is I sent an email to myself saying I shared a spreadsheet. And so the user will authenticate their access and it creates that personalized view for them moving forward. And what's nice about this is that as a user creates their dashboard, these are also stored inside a centralized folder, so that that way if a user ever loses their access or loses the link to their dashboard, I can go find that for them and help them say, "Here's your dashboard. Make sure you bookmark this moving forward," and I can help people navigate that space a little easier. And then as an added layer of protection, once that first time user opens their dashboard, they have to actually authorize their dashboard to make a connection to the administrator dashboard.

So as that user goes in, they'll click first time user, authorize my access, which creates that connection with my master listing page, but also allows them to edit their own page. And if they were to delegate their page to someone else, that user will then be able to then authorize their own access to manage that page as well. So here's what their dashboard would look like. So when a user comes onto their dashboard, it lists all of the compliance items that fall under their scope. And these are all assigned based off of the master listing. So they don't see all the other things that anybody else sees. This only belongs to one person in a department. And when a user goes and hovers over an item that is as highlighted here, you can see this DoD MOU review will make a pop-up box and it will tell them a description of that item that's due.

And it will give them the regulatory components, and it'll help describe what it is that they need to do, so that from a succession planning perspective, if somebody new were to come in, they understand what the tasks are that are required to complete these items. What's nice about this is that it creates a deadline for them in sequential order based off of the date. So they're not one's due at the end of the year. It's all in order. So that as it only shows one year of compliance items, the user can go through and say, "Hey, I've got these things that are due in the future, I want to make sure I remind myself how to go in and make sure I complete this on time. So a user can go through the Google add me to the calendar feature.

And we created this so that the user can go click add me, and it actually creates a direct link to their own personal calendar, and it pulls in all of the data that is housed from the compliance calendar into the meeting notes inside their calendar. And then they can go adjust the due date based off of when they feel comfortable. So for example, and this was due in March of 2023 on the second, but the user could go change this to say, "I want to look at this in January," and they could go change those so that they could remind themselves. And then that way, if a user ever comes through and says, "Oh, this was overdue, we could go and even look and see if they even added it to their calendar and remind them, "Hey, this feature's out there. Let's try to use this in the future." But this was a nice feature that we added so that that way, our users were able to not just solely rely on one page. Since we all work on calendars quite a bit, it seemed easier to add this in there.

So when a user comes in to their dashboard, as you saw on the prior slide, there's a little checkbox on the left hand side of an item. And so when a user comes and is ready to close their item, let's say for example, they updated their DoD MOU for tuition assistance, they click on the little orange box next to their icon, and then click mark is completed. And what that does is it brings up a pop-up box that allows them to add their notes to that item. So for example, if I were to add a note that says this item is only a single item for this year and will no longer be applicable moving forward, I could add that in there and it tells me that I don't need to populate that on the future calendar. Also, it helps me just understand what happened when they went through the item. For example, if a teacher education program has a postponement due to the state's approval process, they could add in their approval process was postponed and that's the reason why it was late.

So once they do that, they click the okay button, and then it also will populate an attachment field. And this isn't a required field since many items don't need an attachment. But for example, if you're submitting reports to the Department of Education or any state agency or a creditor, it's pretty important to have those as a repository. So what we did is create a, we'll say a repository dump of all the documentation that people submit. So when they go and choose this, it links to the calendar item that's assigned to them. So that if we ever need to go back, we can go associate what they attached to their items. For example, when we submit our teacher education for Title II, we are required to submit reports, and I have to post those to the website. Instead of making someone send me an email that says, "Here's the report we need to post," they can attach it to the item, and I know that I'm ready to go post that to our compliance and accreditation website.

The other real neat thing we built into here is some reporting and notification structure. So the system administrator is able to maintain on-time compliance through these tools. And we have a dashboard that has the functionality of sending reminders to people for things that are either overdue, due soon, or due in the future. And what this is nice is it's got a reporting feature or a reminder feature to send an email to that person. So the reporting feature sends me just a report of those things that are coming up or things that might be overdue, and I can keep my finger on the pulse of what I might need to do to reach out since it's always nice to get a personalized email from somebody as a reminder or just maybe knock on someone's door and have a conversation about what might be due soon. But we're also able to send automatic email reminders to people just by simply clicking a box and sending the reminder to those folks so that they understand that these things are coming up.

It then creates a direct link to their compliance calendar so that they don't have to go find it. So when they get these items, they click on my compliance calendar and it'll take them right to their calendar so they know what they need to get done. And then really what's nice about this is that it sends them an email after seven days of it not being completed. So it'll say, you have an item that's overdue, you need to make sure that this is completed, and we can go through and not have to manually do this all the time. And then finally, managing assignments can be challenging, and so what we did is built in an automatic bulk reassign tool to this feature. So for example, if a point of contact moves positions and someone new comes into this role, we can select them as a user under here, and then replace them with the new staff member.

So if we typed in the staff member's email address and said update, it will update all the compliance items on the master sheet that are assigned to the old person to the new person, as opposed to going in manually and trying to change all those. So simple click of a button, you can reassign all these, and then I could create a report of all those things to make sure I send that to the new person so they understand their responsibilities as they start their new role.

And this is what our notifications look like. So the first notification that we have is an item due. So as it comes 30 days ahead of when this item might be due, this staff member would receive a notification that reminds them you have an item that's due. And it gives them the deadline, it gives them the regulatory agency that makes up what the action item is, and then it gives them a link to their compliance calendar, as well as our department information should they have any questions or they need to reassign it to someone. So we really ask that staff do these promptly. And everyone's been very good about understanding these since the email does read important action required and most people pay attention to that.

This is a copy of our report notification. And so when I send myself a report of the things that are due, this is what it looks like, and it tells me who is responsible for that. So it'll give me their email address so that I can go reach out to those people directly if I need to or maybe go knock on their door. And it gives me the item types and the deadline so that we can prioritize those. And then the final one is what nobody wants to get is a pass due notification. So with these pass due notifications, it gets sent to the user and it says, these items are passed due and do this as soon as possible, and it gives them the same information. Luckily, we don't have too many of these, but there are people that go out of office or move and we have to follow up on those. So it gives us a way to understand what's overdue.

And it sends me a copy of this as well so that I have a heads up as to those people that were notified. Especially if I get it out of office, I know I need to reach out to someone else. So our future state of this work, one of the major tasks that's managed within this calendar is an annual compliance audit of our web pages, and that's part of my department. So we look at about a thousand web pages for compliance, accuracy, accessibility, and that incorporates up to 75 staff members. So we always seek their feedback on how to improve the system, and because a lot of these users might only use this tool one time during the year as opposed to other users that are more accountable to financial aid disclosures and other things like that. So we have a little survey that people can fill out and we would love your feedback on what you think of this tool, and if you'd like to know more information.

So if you scan the QR code, you'll be able to get sent to a Google survey, and it will provide you an outlet to provide me feedback. And then if you'd like to know more information about the system, I'd be happy to connect with you so that we can explore some options on how you can do this too. And with that, I thank you so much for your time, and I can take some questions.

Jana Walser-Smith, Director SAN:

Ramsey, this is so very detailed and just really so innovative. I'm going to ask you this. So when thinking about this entire process, what has been the impetus for the biggest shakeup? In other words, how has faculty, how are the folks who are in the trenches reacting to the notifications, all of the different processes? How has that been?

Ramsey Itani:

It's actually been very positive. I get more responses actually from things that people might receive because they say urgent action needed. And also, they like it because it's easier to navigate. We have had a lot of people actually wanting to move off of their SharePoint page data and moving to a more Google-ized, we'll say, as we say, centralized way to manage their data, their communications. And so it's been a nice shift as technology has also offered more outlets for them so that they can explore how to make some connections with other departments. And what's nice about the connection part of it is that as many institutions operate in silos, it's created a little more accountability and transparency for people so that they can communicate a little bit better and calibrate our systems to fine tune how we serve our students.

Jana Walser-Smith, Director SAN:

Interesting. So this is just a little opportunity for you to brag because I know you've been in the trenches of this entire process. So when you think about everything that you guys have changed, shaken up, re-implemented, reinvented, what part of this process are you most proud of?

Ramsey Itani:

I think we're most proud of the fact that we did this for $0. Being a community college and under public stewardship and funded by... We're not funded by the state. So in Arizona, we don't get funding from the state. We are property tax funded and tuition revenue funded. So we're really thinking about the dollar savings from an institutional perspective so that we could focus on investing that in our staff, investing that in training, investing that somewhere that is really needed because I think a lot of the easy way is to buy a system and to buy something and then have someone else manage it and take the easy way. I'm more of a high road person. I take the high road. And it may be the harder road, may be more uphill at times, but at the same time, I think we learn a lot more about our system by really digging into how we operate, and really thinking about how this doesn't just impact us but our students. Because if we can't maintain compliance and maintain things on time and be accountable for that, it might impact how we're accountable to our students.

And really, that's ultimately who we serve. We're serving our students and our community. So I think that's... Our focus is saving money for our students so that we don't pass that cost onto them for their tuition.

Jana Walser-Smith, Director SAN:

Just quickly, from conceptualization to implementation, what was the timeframe?

Ramsey Itani:

We started in May of 2022, and we were able to roll out a prototype in November of 2022 with the launch, hard launch in January.

Jana Walser-Smith, Director SAN:

Wow, so just a few months.

Ramsey Itani:

So, in 2023. Yeah, so we did this in about five months, really six months of testing, and it was at the same time when we were doing the Drupal migration. So we did a pilot during the Drupal migration, that was part of the process, but the hard launch was really in January. And we did it with a small team of four.

Jana Walser-Smith, Director SAN:

Wow.

Ramsey Itani:

So it only took four people. We had a IT developer who's a Google genius, we had myself, we had a project manager, and one other leader from our institutional effectiveness team.

Jana Walser-Smith, Director SAN:

So this is very doable. So I'm going to take this back to, for folks who may want to implement something similar or follow your lead and do something just like this, where would you recommend those people, those folks to begin?

Ramsey Itani:

I think the primary way we started was looking at how we're doing this and map it out and figure out where our holes are, and then thinking about our end user and what systems are available. So not necessarily in that order, but I think evaluating what you're doing now is the first thing, and just understanding whether there's a need, because many institutions might already have something similar and they could modify it. And so I think thinking about cost effectiveness and all the other things we talked about earlier is important because stakeholders don't want to fund something that you might be able to do internally. So talking to those stakeholders was probably the key thing that we did once we evaluated the system, is really getting down to what you can do, how much money is available, and then what technology resources you have to do this.

If you have a person on your campus that is a Google genius or Google guru, as we say, they can do this pretty easily. And it's not something that requires a whole division to work on. You could do it with a very small group of people, and I think you could do it probably faster than we could.

Jana Walser-Smith, Director SAN:

Perfect advice. Thank you for that. So SAN members and those of you who look to implement something like this, I think Ramsey's done us all a justice by providing that QR code where you can scan, give your feedback. And of course, he's offered to field any questions that you might have about implementing a process such as this. So for that, we are so very thankful for Rio Salado College and for Ramsey, and for the sharing of this very, very valuable information and giving us the ins and outs of this project. That seems like it's doable if you guys were able to implement in five to six months. So this is very, very impressive, and we thank you for the sharing of the information.

Ramsey Itani:

Well, thank you for your time and look forward to hearing from everybody.

Jana Walser-Smith, Director SAN:

All right.