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Customer Case Study: Sallie Mae

Alation: The front door to data intelligence at Sallie Mae

sallie mae®

- **Industry:** Financial Services
- **Headquarters:** Newark, Delaware

Challenge: Distributed data

Elizabeth Friend has always loved working with data and analytics. "I felt like it came naturally to me," she says. "I love the analytics, the visualization of data for people who aren't necessarily data literate. You can make information come to life for them." That's exactly what she does in her role as senior director of data governance at Sallie Mae.

Known primarily as the market leader for private student lending, Sallie Mae has expanded their vision to become a comprehensive education solutions company. Friend describes it this way, "Yes, we're a bank, and we give loans, but we're making education possible for many people who didn't think that was something that they would ever be able to do."

The company sought to tailor experiences for customers, which required a deeper understanding of customer data. However, Sallie Mae needed a comprehensive data governance program to ensure that the more than 500 data users across the company could find the right customer information at the right time and know it was fit for purpose.

Business Results

500 data users across the company

250 TB of accumulated data

350,000 database fields to be cataloged

"While we didn't have a formal data governance program, we did govern things in different areas of the company," Friend explains. "However, we are actually a bank, and it's a regulated industry. We realized to get better we needed to have a very targeted data governance program for the entire enterprise." Friend knew that a successful program also required building a data culture where the use of trusted data would become a central pillar of doing business.

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> **Elizabeth Friend**
> **Senior Director of Data Governance, Sallie Mae**

Objectives

To embed a strong data culture around their data program, Sallie Mae needed to:

- Create a path to consistent, shared data
- Engage analytics leaders to drive the governance program
- Strengthen data stewardship and data literacy

With these goals in place, leaders set out to find the right technology partner to help bring them to life.

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Implementation: A "front door" to critical data

Sallie Mae realized that a data catalog could provide a single pane of glass view into their data, but it was not sufficient for their data governance needs. That's why they chose the Alation Data Intelligence Platform. "Alation is where we can integrate all aspects of data governance—not just cataloging the information but driving policies and providing a place for people to collaborate," says Friend.

With Alation, Friend and team have transformed how people with questions find answers. Before, people would search distributed data dictionaries, glossaries, and Excel spreadsheets. Or they would "phone a friend" and ask the relevant data owner or analyst. To enable self-service (and make search simpler), the Data Governance team developed a stewardship program in which designated experts curate and oversee the domain of data they know best. They then share their knowledge in Alation articles—so the experts can focus on analytics instead of addressing questions. "When people are looking for information, we want their first thought to be Alation and not our data stewards," says Friend. "We want Alation to be the front door for trusted information about data at Sallie Mae."

Sallie Mae took a systematic approach to rolling out Alation. The first curation effort is addressing their critical financial reporting assets to provide a strong data catalog for their most critical data. "Alation allows people to get the metadata about the information they're looking for," says Friend. "They can see the context and lineage for the data and even collaborate with others who are using it."

To promote leadership in data governance, Friend's team created a steering group where analytics leaders across the company collaborate. They monitor and promote governance initiatives and set the direction for data governance at the organization. To boost data literacy, Friend has created an Analytics Academy. More than 100 people attend each bi-weekly session about a myriad of data and analytics topics.

Results: A strong data culture built on governance and leadership

Well-governed, accessible data has played a key role in Sallie Mae's transformation to an education solutions company. Today, Alation is providing insight on critical data to the organization. "Alation reduces the time required for search and discovery of data," notes Friend. "If people are thinking data, I want them to think Alation. It's the Wikipedia of information for us."

When leadership had questions about time to value of data projects, Friend leveraged Alation Professional Services to create Sallie Mae's roadmap to data culture. "The Alation Data Culture Maturity model helped give us the language for aligning on the time that projects take," she says. "Specifically, the journey map gave us language to describe the incremental value that stakeholders will receive because we're often not aligned on how long folks will have to wait for the end of a project."

Friend and her team have built a strong data culture with Alation at the center. "Before Alation, I would describe things as disjointed," concludes Friend. "After Alation, people have been brought together in a number of different forums as we implement data governance. So when I mentioned that Alation is the front door, everyone's gathering at the same house."

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About Sallie Mae

As the first education solutions company and market leader for private student lending, Sallie Mae provides financing to help students and families responsibly pay for higher education. They also help families make informed decisions about saving and planning for college. Sallie Mae wants every student to have the knowledge, confidence, and motivation to make the most of their unique journey; they're committed to helping them understand their options, borrow responsibly, and set themselves up for success now and in the future.

Data Environment

- Snowflake
- AWS Glue
- AWS S3
- Netezza
- Oracle
- SQL Server
- Power BI
- Tableau