Transformation of Student Services: The Process and Challenge of Change

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Abstract

Student services are the administrative backbone of higher education. These offices orient, register, provide aid, advise, bill for and collect tuition; they are often the first and last points of contact for students while they are attending an institution – either in-person or at a distance. As the nature of the student population has changed, so have the delivery of these services. The need for change in student service delivery came from several directions. First, and probably foremost, technology allowed for easy self-service delivery of traditional information and processes. Second, students came to institutions knowing the capability of emerging technology and were increasingly less satisfied with waiting in line. Third, across the country there were sweeping statements in the higher education community that customer service and satisfaction were integral parts of institutional missions and traditional service delivery modes were simply not adequate; to recruit and retain students it was essential to deliver services differently. Finally, the nature, and hence, the needs of learners are evolving; bricks and mortar remained the commonly accepted collegiate experience but increasing numbers of students were availing themselves of on-line educational opportunities. The confluence of these factors set the stage for overhauling service delivery. This chapter will examine how the University of Minnesota has expanded and changed student services and service delivery.

Introduction

Student services are the administrative backbone of higher education. These offices orient, register, provide aid, advise, bill for and collect tuition; they are often the first and last points of contact for students while they are attending an institution. As the nature of the student population has changed, so have the delivery of these services. This chapter will examine how the Office of Enrolled Student Services at the University of Minnesota has expanded and changed service and service delivery to meet the ever-changing needs of students.

The University of Minnesota is a public, research university with a student population of over 65,000 students (http://www.umn.edu). In the mid-1990s the University took advantage of the growing availability of the internet to offer students the option of registering for courses on-line. This was only the beginning of the University's commitment to altering service delivery to "decentralized learner-oriented services…[which] includes numerous opportunities for self-help as well as access to information and services on the part of students and faculty" (Kvavik & Handberg, 2000, p. 30). Learners rapidly altered their behaviors to utilize the ever-increasing self-service options and to spending less time in-line for service and more time on-line.

Regardless of the delivery mode, "the paramount goal of the registrar's office is to serve the students and faculty promptly, equitably, and courteously" (Quann and Associates, 1979, p. 116). This commitment to customer service extends far beyond the registrar's

office to include all student service units. Changing the way service is delivered has allowed the Office of Enrolled Student Services at the University of Minnesota to further the institution's educational mission through serving the administrative needs of all student learners, not just those who participate in the educational enterprise on-campus.

According to the well-worn Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary in the office, service is defined as "useful labor that does not produce a tangible commodity" (1969, p. 793). Despite its age, this definition still applies to higher education student services regardless of their delivery mode. Either on-line or in-person student services provide a non-tangible, yet essential commodity to the wide variety of members of the institutional community.

Student services are accessed for various reasons and in an array of ways. As a direct service provider of student services (i.e., registration, financial aid, bursar) we must meet the burgeoning needs of all constituents; however, the most critical service user is the student. The role of service in supporting students' academic endeavors is ideally invisible; students are able to register, apply for and receive financial aid, pay their bills, and receive transcripts without much thought as to the mechanism by which it is accomplished.

American higher education is often referred to as a dinosaur, especially with regards to change – it is large, cumbersome, heavily laden with layers of bureaucracy and their "existing structures have response sets that shape what follows" (Clark, 1983, p. 184). The delivery of student services is no different. "We have always done it that way" is a common response to inquiries as to why things are done a particular way. Historically student support has focused on traditional students – those who are on campus. Technological developments have allowed the campus to deliver an ever increasing number of services off campus. In the early phases these services included telephone registration and grade checking. Students quickly availed themselves of these self-service options. As the computer became progressively more commonplace, it was only natural for the delivery of traditional student services to move to this medium.

Student Services Delivery

The University of Minnesota was an early adopter of on-line student services. Students could conduct their routine registration business (i.e., checking registration time, registering for classes) from the comfort of their home – if they had a modem – or in one of the many computer labs on campus. Although the business part of registration was accessible to students on-line most of the policies, procedures and processes associated with being a student remained rooted in paper and people. The advent of the World Wide Web allowed for the further development of self-service functionality.

The need for change in student service delivery came from several directions. First, and probably foremost, technology allowed for easy self-service delivery of traditional information and processes. Second, students came to institutions knowing the capability of emerging technology and were increasingly less satisfied with waiting in line. Third, across the country there were sweeping statements in the higher education community that customer service and satisfaction were integral parts of institutional missions and traditional service delivery modes were simply not adequate; to recruit and retain students it was essential to deliver services differently. Finally, the nature, and hence, the needs of learners are evolving; bricks and mortar remained the commonly accepted

collegiate experience but increasing numbers of students were availing themselves of on-line educational opportunities. The confluence of these factors set the stage for overhauling service delivery.

Student as Customer

The student as customer - with rights and expectations - is often met with mixed reactions. The academic enterprise has traditionally been "producer-oriented" (Kvavik & Handberg, 2000, p. 30) in which students were passive vessels to be filled with knowledge, not as consumers of education. As students have moved away from the "vessel" orientation into a more interactive, consumer role they have begun to question more often the return on investment for their educational dollars. Many academics cringe at the commoditization of education. Previously frontline staff in academia focused on process not service. To combat this attitude it is helpful to have a campus change agent or "champion." This individual needs to have a firm understanding of the changing nature of technology, student service functionality, and institutional political dynamics because it is his or her responsibility to provide vision and to guide the campus community in the change process. The institution must be prepared for policy, procedure and process changes.

To the current students, technology is as much a part of the educational environment as chalk and blackboards have been staples in the past. It appears clear that the younger the age group the higher the percentage that uses technology for school, work, and leisure. Since technology is integrated into all areas of students' lives it is not surprising that contemporary students expect colleges and universities to keep pace with technological advances.

Within the higher education community, no where is the demand for ever evolving technology more keenly felt than with distance learners. Distance learners expect, and should expect, an educational product similar to the more traditional on-campus learner's experience. Their special needs and requirements – especially their physical distance from campus - should not inhibit their ability to earn a post-secondary or post-baccalaureate degree. As technology has advanced, student services are ideally poised to change their mode of delivery to meet these learners' needs. The University of Minnesota has found that traditional, on-campus learners also benefit greatly from these service enhancements.

Service Technology Implementation

Utilizing technology to deliver service, however, should not be haphazard. Colleges and universities need to establish priorities for development and implementation. These priorities must balance the often competing needs of learners with those of faculty and staff. The overarching goal is to provide the best electronic student services possible for on campus and distance learners. Using technology to solve problems, improve service and provide better levels of service is a fundamental element for today's learner.

When implementing new service delivery options, it is essential for the institution to establish concrete and measurable milestones, deliverables and objectives. These will be used to determine whether or not the established outcomes were achieved. One example of a measurable outcome is monitoring the number of phone calls received during peak times compared to a previous year. Through tracking the most frequently asked

questions (FAQ) and creating a web-based FAQ, learners can access information at their leisure. The FAQ can also shed light on service areas that may offer the greatest benefit to distance learners, and should therefore be added to the list of self-service implementation priorities.

The following list of questions guides the discovery process stemming from the FAQ: Why is the question being asked so frequently? How can we, the service provider, disseminate this information sooner or in another format? How can we eliminate the need for this question? Should we develop additional communication via email or on the web for the learner? How can we solve the issue electronically so the learner doesn't need to stop processing and contact a service provider? By examining the answers to all of these questions, services continue to improve and learner satisfaction increases.

Other measurable outcomes can come directly from learners though survey methods or involving students in continuous process improvement initiatives. Institutional staff (i.e., advisers, faculty members, and front-line staff) can also provide keen insight into service improvements and their impact.

Projects have a tendency to creep in their scope. Scope creep is defined as continuing to add requirements or enhancements to the point where the project becomes so large it is difficult to implement. Scope creep can emerge from nearly anywhere in the institution; as campus members learn of new developments they naturally want to amend the project to meet an emerging need in their area. Ideally a project will accomplish everything in the first phase, but many times a project needs additional phases. It is essential to establish clear and agreed upon project objectives and outcomes early on in the service improvement process. This step should be completed immediately after identifying the problem and suggested high level resolution. The objectives and outcomes clearly establish a common goal for the team. In addition, project success depends heavily upon identifying a project lead. He or she has the task of identifying key individuals, getting buy-in from the institutional community and educating those who will be directly involved. Identifying this person is critical to project success. Success also hinges on this person's ability to engage the necessary constituents in the project.

Resources and Administrative Support

The administration must be an ally when transforming to electronic services. If they are not behind the project, it is bound to fail. Hence, it is essential to inform top-level administrators of the goals, objectives and outcomes of the project early in the process to establish their buy-in. Communication and engagement of the key administrative vice presidents is necessary for the following reasons: first, floating the idea by the stakeholders with a well-prepared presentation with the outcomes, service improvements and cost savings will allow the project to move forward rapidly and, second, by getting these key individuals involved and excited about the service improvement project, they will take personal interest in it. Administrative interest, understanding and support provide the avenue to ask for additional assistance if required to complete the project by the set deadline. It also underscores to members of those within and outside the institution the customer service aspect of the institution's mission.

Adequate resources are a critical factor in transforming to a best practices electronic services model. It is demoralizing to those involved to identify new areas for service

improvement, only to learn that there are no resources available to implement them. Resource requirements include money for communication, software, and hardware and other common goods, as well as technical staff and/or business analysts, who can identify issues, write project requirements, test the product and develop the new service.

Change Implementation and Maintenance

It is important to establish strong working relationships between the information technology (IT) staff and the functional business staff. The two groups must work as one team with a common goal of transforming student services, since each brings a unique perspective to the project. The business analyst (BA) understands what the learner needs and wants, and the technical staff uses their skills to make it happen. If the two groups cannot work together the project could potentially fail.

The IT staff members also play a large role in electronic student services beyond the initial development and set-up. The IT staff must have the infrastructure in place to host the web services, provide troubleshooting tools for the business analysts, plan maintenance in coordination with business functions, and provide upgrade plans to stay current on technology impacts. They are responsible for load testing to assure the BA that the service application can handle the anticipated volume of users. There are various software pieces that all must fit together so that the user can freely perform the business requested. IT staff have a huge service role to play in all project: the IT staff is charged with providing uninterrupted learner support in all these business functions.

The business analyst (BA) is the key player for designing and creating the electronic functionality necessary to satisfy the learner. They identify the requirements necessary for execution of the electronic service plus ensure that all compliance and audit regulations are followed. Not only does the BA provide the requirements, but also establishes usability testing, writes and performs all the testing necessary to identify any bugs during development. The BA also monitors the application once it goes live and looks for ways to continue enhancing and improving the service tool for the learner. Further, the BA accounts for the quality control of the application and creates a list of enhancements as the project moves forward. The BA is also the communication link to the learner and others with a need to know.

The project manager, BA and IT staff must watch for project scope creep. Established project outcomes and implementation deadlines are compromised when additional requirements are requested throughout a project. As members of the institutional community understand and see the uses of technology, they often want to add new functionality to projects.

Another important but often overlooked aspect of any project is how maintenance will be performed once an application goes live. The human resource and financial investment necessary for maintaining and upgrading the project must be addressed in the beginning. Although it is not as glamorous as the initial development and implementation of the project, the BA and IT units must perform maintenance as a necessary requirement of the application.

The project lead and business analyst must keep in mind federal laws and regulations plus compliance rules. It is recommended to bring the internal auditor into the project early on and get compliance sign off as early as possible. Auditors look for privacy of

student data, secure methods of authentication, security of the data and other compliance issue assurances. The auditor can provide solid recommendations that secure compliance of the application.

Organizational Transition

Successful project implementation depends on several other factors not previously mentioned. The staff within the business unit must buy into the new way of performing business. Of equal importance, the university community must understand the reasons for the new application and the benefits to them and their colleagues. Students or learners also must understand the reason for the new or improved electronic service or have knowledge of its implementation.

In many of the electronic service projects at the University of Minnesota, students are involved in the development or have suggested the project so gaining their support and acceptance is not an issue. The student services staff have consciously partnered with various student organizations which allowed for up-front involvement of the learner or recipient of the future service. Learners have come to enjoy this interaction and appreciate this way doing business. We have also found that students are our best means of communicating with the wider institutional community regarding new projects. As the old shampoo commercial said, “They tell two friends, and they tell two friends, and so on…” Additionally, students have proven to be a strong voice in convincing the faculty and campus staff that in moving to more electronic delivery of service is both beneficial and necessary.

The smooth transformation and integration of electronic services into the established business process is another factor that determines learner satisfaction. Previously service offices were silos within a community and communication was not common between units – there were no integrated computer systems, no web technology nor shared equipment. The learner ran from building to building completing his or her business. Today with electronic services, integrated systems, improved equipment, and web technology these silos will be nonexistent and service provision is ideally seamless to the learner. Business units must learn to work together as one team developing superb web applications that combine the business functions allowing for the development of a useful application for the learner.

To facilitate breaking down the long-established silos, the project lead must look at process changes across units, bring these groups together and show them the benefits of collaboration for themselves and the learner. Fear of potential job losses, loss of control, or simply the unknown often makes changing processes or combining processes challenging for the units involved. In most instances, the staff members who are willing to change will find that their time is freed-up to focus on other areas in need of attention since most units have too many job related activities to keep up with demand. Implementing electronic services provides tools to assist or refocus attention on other activities within the office and gives way to new creative business process solutions.

Understanding how the new application will impact the office becomes critical for keeping office staff composed. As technology improves and allows for increased automation of traditionally hands-on duties, jobs will change and retention may develop into an issue. For example at the University of Minnesota prior to implementing web

registration, all staff in the registrar's office were required to assist with registration. The office pulled as many staff as possible to process registrations for students in arena fashion (students gathered in a large arena, waited in line, and registered for classes). The goal was to get students in and out as fast as possible with little concern for customer service. Since students waited in long lines and were very frustrated by the time they actually registered, customer service skills of employees was not a concern. Web registration drastically changed the registration process. Students embraced the application, and currently 92-percent of the student population uses the web to register for classes. The students who do not register on the web often require additional help, which means that the staff members in the student services centers need to have a different type of skill sets than those who had traditionally assisted students. Distance education learners usually need to conduct business via email or telephone if unable to complete transactions over the web applications, which requires staff with very good oral and written communication skills.

Generalists were no longer needed at the service counters, and front-line staff needed a new orientation, that is, to see themselves within the entirety of service provision. They needed to understand the registration, financial aid and billing processes and procedures to provide the best service. Learners have made it clear that they expect qualified, competent, decision-makers with experience in customer service at the front-line. Many of the learners prefer to process their business over the web, so if they must come into a center, make a telephone call or send an email for assistance, they demand and expect good quality service. The front-line staff members continually receive training on performing the web functions, systems capabilities, regulatory and compliance aspects of service, and policy issues. Due to their extensive training and thorough understanding of the student records system, these individuals are in high demand within and outside the university. As a result, retention of these key staff is an issue which was not anticipated, and necessitates a reorganization of units at the University of Minnesota. The Office of Enrolled Student Services created a salary band for the one stop counselors. The criterion used consists of number of years of service and performance levels during those years. The counselors are also offered the lead worker positions if staff should leave those positions. This organizational structure may help in retaining these staff.

Although not all staff members will be directly involved in the project to transition to electronic services, likely all staff members will be affected by the change. As the nature of business changes, staff need clear expectations and requirements set for them. Part of this may include reviewing or rewriting job descriptions; and reviewing job classifications by the central human resources unit as well as within the business unit. One challenge the University of Minnesota encountered was that central human resources offices had not updated job descriptions to keep up with technological advancements, so examining job classifications was difficult. For example, many job classifications identified typing speed and accuracy of applicants but never addressed proficiency in basic office hardware and/or software. Additionally, if the central human resources office has not been updating job classifications, problems may occur with labor unions and delay the staff transition. The necessary time and resources for educating and retraining staff members is also an important factor to be cognizant of as staff members are asked to perform new duties. It is important to recognize that the process-oriented supervisor may struggle with the new type of staff required and

management must assist and support these staff members, too. Supervisors that are focused on process and not problem resolution or empowerment of their professional staff will have difficulty working in this new environment. The one stop counselors must have the authority to make decisions and not solicit approval from a supervisor on issues. The one stop counselors must be accountable for their actions and only solicit a supervisor if needed. Remembering that the web provides many of the transaction based self-service functions for students, only students with problems or questions tend to contact the one stop counselors.

Standard workday hours for student service employees no longer exist. Since electronic services are available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, office hours are extended. Learner helplines must be staffed well into the evening and on the weekends.

Manage Priorities and Demands

As the transition to electronic services occurs, frequent formal and informal communication from supervisory staff is essential; no staff member should be caught off-guard regarding their role during or after the transition. Supervisors need to be open to employee feedback during this period. Some of the best ideas for further service improvement come from those most closely involved in the process. Moreover, giving staff the opportunity to provide feedback – either positive or negative – helps with team building and staff morale.

Some staff resistance can be expected because transiting to the new way of providing service is often difficult. These staff may be skeptical and some may cause problems within the office and they may need extra attention and guidance. Unfortunately, some of these staff members may not have the capability of making the necessary change and in these cases job reclassifications and salary adjustments are appropriate. Regardless of how much of student services are automated, there will always be back office processing to perform.

As universities continue to explore ways to increase electronic service offerings and meet the mounting needs of the distance learner, the list of service improvement projects will continue to grow. However, there will never be enough resources or time to implement all the improvements on the list. Instituting a campus- or institution-wide steering committee is one way to help establish priorities from the list of new projects. Individual committee members may not agree on the priorities, but consensus must be reached for projects to move forward. At the University of Minnesota, the student administration director compiles a list of all potential projects for the steering committee to review and prioritize. The information on the list is solicited from a variety of resources: associate deans, individual colleges and schools, students, departments, faculty and campuses. Investigating and determining the biggest win (impact) and quickest win (short project high profile) for the community helps set the priority. This process works very well.

The university community expects improvements, enhancements and new applications on a continuing basis. As tuition continues to increase, students' service expectations also increase. Service units are often caught in the untenable position of wanting to (and often being mandated to) provide increased electronic services, while simultaneously incurring large budget cuts. The project lead(s) and the "champion" must educate the

administration that the technology and service units provide the infrastructure for the institution and must be funded adequately. Documenting the successes and cost savings of various electronic services can aid greatly in this process. In some cases, central administration does not realize that service units provide service to the entire university community and if the unit's funds are cut, services must be eliminated, leaving one of the constituents dissatisfied.

Recognition

Staff members must be recognized and rewarded for their effort to improve student service. Simple rewards bring great satisfaction for employees. Some suggestions include: an additional amount of unrecorded vacation, certificates, flowers, dessert day or a public celebration. These small recognition rewards can provide staff with the much needed and deserving thank you for their dedication.

Professional development increases productivity and energizes employees to think creatively about routine processes or problems. Meeting colleagues around the country and developing relationships allows for sharing of ideas and generating creative ways of performing tasks and improving processes. Colleagues also provide lessons learned and great information on past mistakes providing a better project plan and avoiding known problems. Also, encouraging employees to present at conferences not only recognizes their accomplishments but reflects back very positively on the institution, too.

Content Management

Electronic services, especially email and webpages, should not become information dumping grounds or bulletin boards. As with paper, information posted or sent via electronic means should be selective and purposive, to the point and used only when necessary. Email boxes are filled with junk and web pages are overfilled with updates, useless information and flashy gizmos. Since it is critical to keep to learner informed, selective measures and means need to be put in place to ensure communication is read. Methods would include direct targeted emails, campus newspaper ads, posters, web notes, brochures, and college or department notifications. For the distance education learner, a different approach is necessary. As the distance learner matriculates, communication modes must be understood between the university and the learner. Communicating effectively with the learner requires input from various learner groups. Communication methods would include a web portal designed for the distance learner, informational postings on a website, email, and informational postings on the web.

Many universities are making email the official means of communication with on and off campus students. This has all but eliminated the need for paper. Email eliminates the bad address problem and saves money in postage and mailing. Creation of an email policy for university officials and service units has worked well at many universities.

Distance learners are a highly diverse group. The younger students and their guardians require more information about a university early in high school. To meet this demand, student service units should develop outreach programs. These university employees must be the effective performers who understand their very important role, and make a very good and lasting impression on the potential learner and his or her parents or guardian.

Electronic student service provides the opportunity for continuous process improvement. Once self-service applications are functional it is critical to evaluate them regularly. Researching what is working well and what is not working well allows the business analyst to investigate how to continue to improve service electronically. Involving the users and using them to identify issues benefits the unit. Continuous upgrades keep technology current and applications in sync with various external applications such as browsers, and Internet connections for successful performance.

Managing web content and updating information requires a well-organized process in place or the learner will lose confidence in the information provided. Keeping various links current also adds to the struggle to maintain and keep the system accurate. Several web content management systems exist which allow for continually updating information. Updating information in a timely fashion requires processes coordination by several individuals. Content management allows for notification of issues and accurate information for the learner, but requires fulltime management of the content.

The delivery of student services has changed dramatically in the past five years. Both distance and on-campus students have come to expect that they will be able to conduct their education related business on-line and to only communicate via phone, email or in-person when they encounter a problem. Student service units including college advising offices need to embrace this and seek out new ways to support self-service functionality, rather than view electronic delivery modes as negative. Utilizing technology to perform perfunctory business can free up staff to provide more value-added services to all learners. Moreover, students regardless of their status as an on-campus or distance learner like conducting business electronically.

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