MEETING ACCREDITATION REQUIREMENTS: ARE YOU SERVING DISTANCE LEARNERS?

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ABSTRACT

Recent changes in the higher education landscape have called for greater access and accountability in a number of areas, most particularly distance learning. While there is a very significant instructional aspect to this equation, providing effective support and services to students enrolled in online education is becoming comparatively important, especially with accrediting bodies. However, in meeting the needs of this unique population, institutions are discovering that the services they provide to distance learners can be offered to all students, regardless of where they live or how they choose to take their classes. This article provides an overview of the Welcome Center, created in 2009 at Florida State College at Jacksonville, as a model for delivering quality and effective online student services to students, to include strategic planning, assessment and evaluation, environmental work design, functions, staffing, training, and technological systems.

KEYWORDS

Distance learning, online learning, student services, online services, accreditation requirements, welcome center, call center.

I.   INTRODUCTION

Ensuring that distance learners have access to student services is critical to their success in pursuing their education. Students need a method for completing their transactions easily in order to be admitted and maintain consistent enrollment in their programs of study. Additionally, a key component of a successful distance learning program is ongoing and accessible advising for students. Accrediting bodies require that distance learning students receive equivalent services provided to those on campus [1]. Given that the method in which services are provided to distance learners are scrutinized more closely than ever before, it is crucial to ensure that institutions meet these standards, as well as provide quality and exceptional experiences for all students.

In 2011, the Instructional Technology Council (ITC) conducted a survey of 143 member institutions regarding issues and trends in distance learning. Survey respondents reported, "an 8.2 percent increase for distance education enrollments—substantially higher than the overall increase in national campus enrollments" [2, p. 7]. This is a critical finding and one that impacts institution in a number of areas, such as finances, instruction, and services. In fact, this was the first year respondents indicated, "the greatest challenge was providing adequate student services for distance education students. Many campuses have seen a significant reduction in student services staff due to budget cuts" [2, p. 8].

In reviewing data from past year surveys, this challenge has consistently remained near the top of the rankings (generally as the second or third biggest challenge). This indicates that this is not a new problem,

but one that institutions have been struggling to balance for quite some time. One of the key components of effective online student services support is advising and counseling, yet less than half (49 percent) of institutions reported offering this service [2]. As increasing numbers of distance education programs are developed, so must the online student support in order for students and institutions to be successful and remain competitive with these ventures [3].

It is essential when designing support services for distance learners that the special needs of these learners are considered. Distance learners often have to figure out how to navigate through websites, catalogs, and different offices to reach the correct contacts to support their needs. According to Pullen, "The Southern Regional Educations Board's Electronic Campus (SREB, 2004), designed to help students find and enroll in high quality online courses and programs, states as part of its Institutional Context and Commitment component that students must have reasonable and adequate access to student services and resources appropriate to support their learning" [1, p. 243].

However, it often is not economical to design an entire student support system exclusively for online learners, as this usually is just one of many different student populations at an institution [4]. Many students, particularly at the community college, work full-time and have families, making it difficult for them to travel to a campus during the day, when most offices are open. According to Hornak, Akweks, and Jeffs, "Online services are not just for students enrolled in online courses; they can enhance the collegiate experience for all students, particularly those who have infrequently accessed college resources in the past or may prefer to access help and information on the Web" [3, p. 80]. Therefore, it is prudent to develop services that meet the needs of distance learners and also can be utilized by a larger student population [4].

Given this growing need for online student support services, Florida State College at Jacksonville developed a district-wide Welcome Center in 2009. The Welcome Center is a new center where student services are delivered exclusively via phone and internet, thus meeting the needs of all students who choose not to come to a campus to receive services.

The mission of the Welcome Center is to provide exceptional student services to include initial contact, admissions, financial aid, advising, enrollment and registration, and other informational assistance by a single employee in a single interaction, with minimal transfer to other parties. Through the use of innovative technologies, the Welcome Center effectively supports the unique needs of its diverse learners as they transform their lives through the successful achievement of their educational goals.

This article provides an overview of how this center was created and offers suggestions for how to develop this type of environment at an institution, whether for a large, multi-campus institution such as Florida State College, or for a smaller, single-campus institution. Areas discussed include strategic planning, assessment and evaluation, environmental work design, functions, staffing, training, and technological systems.

II. STRATEGIC PLANNING

The planning process in developing a center that has the capabilities to serve a distant population cannot be underestimated. There are a number of areas that need to be planned in advance of implementation, including physical structure, software and hardware, staffing, training, assessment, and evaluation. According to Smith, "To provide a successful online student support service, a college must accomplish three key objectives; it must identify the needs of its online and face-to-face learners; make services available when the learner wants them, rather than when the school is comfortable providing them; and provide online services that are as good or better than face-to-face equivalents" [5, p. 29].

Developing the mission and vision of the center will help guide the aforementioned resources. For instance, will the center serve all students, or just those at a distance? Will it be just for new students, or also for continuing students? The purpose of the center must be defined in order to identify the type and number of potential student populations served, as this will affect budget, staffing, software licenses, etc. It is imperative for leaders of this effort to conduct research with students, faculty, and staff to identify

core values with regard to student services in order to develop a holistic model that addresses learner needs.

Additional considerations related to benchmarks and industry standards also need to be determined. For instance, is the goal to ensure that every call be answered within one minute? Is there a precedent that the number of abandoned calls not exceed five percent? Perhaps there is a limit to the amount of time a person can spend on a phone call or in responding to an email. The relationship between wait time for the caller and satisfaction is a consideration that must factor into this, as well as the perceived value students feel they are receiving from the contact received [6]. These are fundamental criteria that should be researched and considered carefully before coming to consensus, as these also will affect the number of staff necessary to meet these standards.

Other analyses that are relevant to the development of guidelines include typical call volume, call forecasts, and communication patterns that currently exist within the institution [7]. Identification of these data will help determine how the institution should proceed with developing standards and norms for the center, along with how staff members will communicate with students. Additionally, it will help to lay the foundation for the main types of communication for the center, such as live chats, phone, or video calls.

The hours of operation and the types of services provided also are areas that will affect the operation of the center. Will the center be open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week? Is there another, feasible alternative for your institution that will still provide equivalent and accessible services to students? Will all types of student services be provided, such as admissions, advising, financial aid, and career planning? Or will there be a limited scope on exactly what is offered? It is critical to make these decisions in the planning process, as these factors will impact staffing and training.

III.   ASSESSMENT AND EVALUATION

Along with defining the mission and goals of a Center, it is necessary to define the outcomes and measures for defining how performance is to be assessed. The outcomes defined for the Welcome Center were in line with the College's institutional effectiveness process and tied to the institutional mission and goals of optimizing access and providing an extraordinarily positive experience for students [8].

However, early on in the planning and development stage, it is important to have a sense of the desired outcomes to ensure that the daily, operational assessment of service, as well as the overall evaluation of quality, is being met. Developing these formative and summative measures is critical to gaining a comprehensive understanding of the strengths and limitations of the center.

The Welcome Center uses a variety of methods for obtaining feedback from students. Online surveys are utilized frequently and a message requesting feedback, along with the survey link, is included in every outgoing message to students as part of the signature line in an email. Another method for obtaining feedback is a brief phone survey students may complete at the end of every phone interaction. These methods allow for immediate feedback from students to achieve the freshest perspective on their most recent interaction.

Administrative outcomes also need to be included in the evaluation process. Many of the factors mentioned earlier, such as number of abandoned phone calls, the time it takes to answer a call, and the number of applications that are processed in an hour, are all very effective means for assessing the productivity of the unit to engage in the cyclical evaluation and enhancement process.

Secret shoppers are an excellent source of assessment, as this allows for very specific areas of concern to be assessed in a somewhat controlled environment. Rather than the more generic feedback on service that a survey provides, secret shoppers are able to tease out more detailed information about the effectiveness of processes and policies that a student encounters as part of their admissions and advising experience. This also allows for the qualitative feedback that is lacking in a scaled-item survey instrument. Assessing the quality of the service provided consists of more than whether calls were answered in a timely manner. It involves the attitudes of those providing service to the students and the perception of whether that person cared about the situation.

IV. ENVIRONMENTAL WORK DESIGN

There are many facets to the planning process, most particularly the tangible aspects of creating a center. The physical environment is one that is becoming increasingly important to industries, as many employers have found that the design of the office workspace can have a substantial impact on communication and productivity [9]. Lievois discusses a number of different aspects to consider when designing the work space, such as privacy, culture, and technology trends [10]. Building a culture that encourages communication and teamwork is critical to the success of this type of center.

Developing a center that is used for a virtual capacity is very different than designing a center where students will be entering and visiting with staff members. As stated by Burroughs and Gunn, "organizations must include design considerations in their strategic planning. Attempting to reengineer an organization without adjusting the physical work environment invites failure" [11, p. 24]. In this sense, it is important to understand the environment that is being created in order to ensure that student services professionals have the necessary tools that they need to work with students online and via telephone. Open spaces that provide opportunity for collaboration, yet also provide individuals with privacy to conduct their work, are an optimal setting.

When planning for a center, particularly the environmental design, it is imperative to plan for the future, even if the resources to conduct certain functions may not yet be attainable. For instance, while the initial plan may be to only use email and phone, future plans might include live chat, video calling, text messaging, and social networking, among others. In research conducted by Oldman, from the Leesman Index on employee workplace satisfaction, 29 percent of respondents felt that "video-conferencing" was important to them, but most (68.2 percent) did not feel that the environmental design was appropriate for this. Additionally, while a majority of respondents (79 percent) indicated that the level of noise was of particular importance to them, almost half were unhappy with this aspect in their work space [12, p. 46]. Ensuring the technical capabilities and the proper work environment (e.g., soundproofing, privacy) to complete these functions, while not yet the staff capability, is an important consideration in the strategic planning process. In the Welcome Center, the decision was made to purchase higher-end computers with built-in cameras for these purposes, knowing that video-calling with students may not be implemented until the second or third year of operation.

A majority of student interactions occur via phone and internet (e.g., email, chat, or video-conferencing). Therefore, it is important to ensure that staff members have the most comfortable and usable phone technologies available to them. High-quality, wireless headsets are one example of contributing to a productive environment. Another is the importance of dual monitors. In the Welcome Center, staff members are able to review a student's information on one monitor, and view the student's account on the second monitor from the student's perspective, so it is easy to connect with the student and understand exactly what it is they are seeing.

However, technology is simply one piece of the planning puzzle. As Smith states, "implementing technology is only the first step. Colleges need to engage in long-term planning—including close examination of their organizational and pedagogical practices—to devise the right technology strategies for their institutions and their students. When those objectives are met, colleges can offer all their learners the tools and services that will increase student enrollment, retention, success and satisfaction" [5, p. 29]. Staffing, training, assessment, and evaluation are all equally important components to developing a positive and productive environment.

V. FUNCTIONS

It is imperative to strategically outline the type of functions the center will offer students in the design of the online service center [3]. To successfully accomplish a holistic design plan, it is best to include representatives from a variety of departments across the institution, including information technology, student services, and academic affairs [3]. The functions of the Welcome Center mirror those provided by the institution's land-based Student Success Centers including, general information and guidance,

admissions, enrollment services, advising, financial aid, transfer services, and career planning. These functions are provided via telephone (both inbound calls and outbound calls), email, and instant chat.

The Welcome Center position descriptions were intentionally designed to include cross-training and service in all areas of student assistance, so that at any given time, it would be seamless for associates to move from one phone queue to the next, or from one processing task to the next, without hesitation. Additionally, this type of design allows for more freedom in staff scheduling, particularly when you have different work shifts due to the extensive hours and numerous assignments and phone queues to cover on a regular basis.

In a complex student contact center such as the Welcome Center, it is important to decide how resources will be assigned to the various services [13]. Will individual sub-departments or teams be created to serve a specific functional area – such as an *Admissions Team* that only responds to admissions related inquiries? Or will all staff members be available to serve anyone regardless of question type? Another possible approach is to utilize partial resource pooling strategies where some specialized sub-departments or teams exist while the remaining staff members are cross-trained to assist students across three or four skill areas [13, 14].

Additionally, when considering resources and number of services provided in an online student contact center, it is crucial to ensure that adequate consideration has been given to the expectations being placed on the employee. Research on human resources and management within high-intensity customer contact center exists (modern call center) and should be carefully reviewed to ensure that the culture created in a center does not contribute to burnout, absenteeism, exhaustion, work overload, etc. Analysis of data including call volume and student traffic patterns relative to the number of services provided by employees will help ensure a collaborative and student-focused culture is created.

VI.   STAFFING

Once the hours of operation have been determined, along with the populations served and standards of operation, it is time to review the number and type of staff necessary to meet those standards. The design of the Welcome Center includes 24 full-time and 10 part-time "Student Experience Associates" (similar to an advisor position); 3 Senior Student Experience Associates; 3 Shift Coordinators; and a Welcome Center Manager.

Full-time staff members are an essential part of the successful operation of a student services center. However, part-time staff members also are a good resource, particularly since many institutions experience peaks in service at different times of the year. Including part-time staff in the overall staffing structure allows for flexibility in maintaining excellent service throughout the year.

The skills required in this type of fast-paced, multi-tasking environment are different than those needed in a typical office environment. Staff members are required to be able to move from phone to computer and manage a variety of different software packages (such as the phone software, the student information system software, etc.) quickly and efficiently. They must be comfortable with technology, be able to multi-task, and have excellent customer service skills. Being flexible and adaptable to change are critical aspects to success for someone in this environment. Additional skills to consider will depend heavily on the core functions of a center, as well as student populations, and may include multi-lingual associates, typing speed, and data collection and management.

When recruiting and selecting for staff members in this environment, it is important to have transparency with applicants so they understand the very unique needs of working in this type of setting. For instance, during the interview, providing a tour of the center so they can visually see the work environment may help them get a feel for whether this would be a good fit for their skills. Additionally, providing a sample rotational task schedule of the duties that they will be expected to complete daily may provide them with a more comprehensive view of what the position entails and how comfortable they are with change and adaptability. As stated by Siegel, "Recruitment and selection present unique challenges. Not only is it necessary to consider tasks and traits in the traditional mode, but team competence and ability to

learn, plus accompanying motivation, are vital attributes" [15, p. 488].

Another aspect to consider in the design of the overall staffing plan is the supervisory structure. There are many factors that may impact the reporting structure. To determine the structure that will work best for the organization, other aspects of the center, such as hours of operation, functions, and position responsibilities, should be considered. Specific factors may include staff schedules, common job responsibilities, and/or core competencies. Depending on the function(s) of the center, supervision may be established based on the core responsibilities of staff. For example, if there is an "Admissions and Enrollment Team," it may be beneficial to have the members of that specific team report to a designated supervisor. Another option may be to organize the reporting structure based on designated shift times, such as an evening/weekend staff reporting to a supervisor who also has the same work schedule and therefore will interact with those staff on a consistent basis. Alternatively, a holistic and cross-functional reporting structure may be utilized if all staff is required to perform the same functions. In this set-up, supervisors would have responsibility for all staff working in the center regardless of work schedule or area of expertise.

VII.   TRAINING

A comprehensive staff training and development program is crucial to the success of any student services department, most particularly one that operates in a highly technical capacity. When analyzing the necessary components of a training program for an online support center, it is important to include topics that address the unique situations that may arise in an environment that does not include face-to-face interaction. Schweber specifically notes, "advisors have to be comfortable with distance communication, with technological multitasking, and with both synchronous and asynchronous relationship management. Since many counseling programs do not offer this perspective, it becomes incumbent upon the institution to hire and train advisors who can excel in these functions" [16, p. 69].

Due to the breadth and depth of the services provided, the Welcome Center Management team designed and implemented a comprehensive training program to ensure staff was cross-trained. This cross-training approach allowed each associate to serve any student regardless of question type. Benefits of cross-training include: improved customer service levels; continued learning and development of staff, reduced number of transfers to other associates or departments, reduced average number of callers waiting in a queue, and shorter wait times [14,7,17].

The training plan developed for the Welcome Center initially consisted of a multi-week training series with a capstone experience of one-on-one "shadowing" with a designated staff member. Due to the structure and function of the center, the training plan was intentionally designed to include content on national standards (e.g. CAS, NACADA), advising theory and practice, diverse populations, extraordinary customer service standards, institutional policies and procedures, and technology systems. These topics were delivered using mixed modalities (e.g. face-to-face training sessions, online learning) to ensure maximum access to the information and accommodate a variety of work schedules.

The Welcome Center's comprehensive training program combined both theory and practice throughout the initial training period. Each week, newly hired associates actively participated in a variety of activities including case scenarios, role plays, knowledge assessments, group discussion, individual activities, and structured research on special populations. The varying techniques allowed both supervisors and trainers to assess the knowledge acquisition of the team of new hires. At the conclusion of each training series, an anonymous online survey was disseminated to the associates. Feedback on the training series and the resources utilized were shared and discussed among leadership, which led to the continual evolution and enhancement of the training experience.

Given the research on contact centers, particularly relating to staff behaviors (e.g., burnout, exhaustion), stressors found in high intensity customer service positions (e.g., negative interpersonal interactions), and organizational culture (e.g., multiple functions with high demand, work overload) the design of the training program intentionally focused on the role of observation, monitoring, feedback, quality

assurance, and a regular review of policies and procedures [7]. The culture in the Welcome Center incorporates tenets of Total Quality Management (TQM) based on continual improvement and process refinement through both quantitative (e.g., number of calls handled per hour, average time to answer, number of documents processed per day) and qualitative (e.g., adherence to standards, content and tone of communication patterns, customer service satisfaction levels) indices [7, 15]. To ensure this philosophy was adopted by all position levels, new hires were encouraged to bring their ideas and concerns forward throughout the training process. Similarly, all Student Experience Associates were provided an opportunity to submit their ideas for process improvement. This culture of continual feedback ensures a collaborative and holistic approach to departmental operations and expectations [15].

The first week of training was designed to set the foundation of knowledge upon which the subsequent training topics would build. During this phase, national standards were introduced. This included the National Academic Advising Association's (NACADA) core values and concept of academic advising, NACADA online resources and the clearinghouse of academic advising resources, and the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) standards for Academic Advising [18, 19, 20]. The week consisted of an overview of the institution, department mission and values, and an outline of the functions of the center. Specific items relating to the role and expectations of each position within the department also were reviewed. In addition, an initial introduction to the forms utilized within the center was included. In fact, every new hire received and completed forms that students utilized during their degree program.

During the second week of training, elements from the first week were reviewed and expounded upon. Video vignettes and case scenarios were utilized to begin applying the theoretical and slightly abstract concepts that were introduced during the first week. Additionally, institutional experts (e.g., Financial Aid, Registrar, Admissions, Dean of Students) began to conduct training on a variety of functions and processes within the college. A group "debriefing" session was included at the end of each day of training to help address any questions or clarify specific items covered during the training.

In training weeks three and four, institutional experts from specific departments continued to deliver training and the training cohort began initial shadowing on specific processes and functions (e.g. responding to student emails, researching student issues, reviewing academic and financial aid documents, etc.) of the center. At this point in the training program, each new hire delivered a presentation based on national research of a special student population. In addition to presenting their research, each person was tasked to create a handout that would be disseminated amongst the training group. This resulted in everyone in the training cohort receiving a packet of information on a variety of student populations.

During the final week of the training program, the training cohort actively participated in both group and individual shadowing sessions with designated associates. They independently researched student inquiries and reviewed their findings with an experienced team lead before following up with the student. Additionally, each member of the training cohort conducted individual advising appointments while being shadowed by an experienced team lead. Once the team lead observed multiple advising sessions, the new associates were able to maintain their own advising load.

VIII. TECHNOLOGICAL SYSTEMS

A. Student Portal

Determining the technological components necessary to run an efficient and effective virtual center is a key element in the planning process. Aside from the technical hardware mentioned previously, there are a number of other pieces that complete the larger picture of an online services center, though some may be beyond the control of this area.

For instance, it is imperative that students have access to their personal student information and can complete transactions (such as registration, financial aid, and payment) online. Many institutions have a student portal where this is included, in addition to other areas of interest. *Connections,* which is the

College's student portal system, allows students to apply, complete residency requirements, complete an online college orientation program, complete the financial aid process, search, register, and pay for classes, complete career inventories, and a variety of other options. There also is an enrollment tracker function that provides students updates as to the status of the admissions status. This portal system enables all students to complete the majority of their student services needs completely online and is what allows the Center to be able to provide students with such a broad range of services.

B. Call Center and Workforce Management Software

Given that the majority of contacts with the Welcome Center are via phone, having the software to support this is crucial to operating a multi-faceted student services center. There are a variety of different types of phone, phone tree, and management software available and a combination of these is usually best.

The most basic and essential system is that which allows associates and supervisors to log in and be assigned to "queues." These phone queues are based on a structured phone tree that is designed to route callers to specified areas. Callers are assigned to queues when there are no associates available to answer a call due to responding to other students [7]. For instance, the Welcome Center has several layers of phone options, depending on whether the student is new or current, is seeking a particular division of the college, or is in need of service with a specific area (e.g., advising, financial aid, admissions, etc.). Staff is assigned to answer calls from one or more queues based on their background and areas of expertise. Once staff log in to the system, only calls from the particular queue(s) to which that person is assigned will be received by that individual.

This allows for a very streamlined process and enables staff to know the types of calls they will be receiving. It also allows for specific tracking of calls for each student service area type and for each staff member, so that evaluation of processes and systems can be analyzed on a consistent basis.

Workforce management software complements this type phone system in that it manages the flow of calls throughout the center. With simply the basic phone system previously described, supervisors must monitor the calls coming in to the various queues regularly. If, for example, there is a backlog of calls in one queue and no calls in another queue, supervisors can manually reassign staff members to different queues to assist with the calls. However, this manual process is very time-consuming and can detract from other supervisory duties.

Workforce management software provides a more efficient method of completing this process by forecasting the call traffic based on trends [7]. The software is designed to monitor the queues and automatically move staff assignments based on the phone traffic flow among the queues. Staff is notified when they have been reassigned so they continue to be aware of the types of calls they may be receiving and respond accordingly.

Both of these systems allow for extensive historical reporting that provides in-depth analysis of calls. Reports can show overviews of an entire term or year, or they can show what has occurred with a particular employee during one specified hour. Additionally, employees may use "reason codes" to further aggregate the data. For instance, even if an employee may not be assigned to answer phones on a particular day (perhaps they are assigned to process applications or are in training), the staff member is required to log in to the system and select a reason code that appropriately describes their activity (e.g., on a break, in training, responding to email). Reports may also be run on these codes either by code or by employee. When this data is cross-analyzed with phone data, the range of reporting allows for extensive evaluation of flow and processes so that enhancements may be made.

C. Workflow Systems

An automated workflow system improves efficiency, accountability, streamlines processes, enhances data tracking and monitoring, and reduces waste. The functions of an online support center will play an important role in the decision of whether or not to implement a document workflow process. The Welcome Center provides services for applicants, current students, and transfer students which result in

thousands of documents (e.g., applications, residency verification, financial aid documents, program of study change form) being processed each month. Without a workflow process, thousands of individual pieces of paper would need to be printed or faxed for student services professionals to process. The Welcome Center implemented an automated workflow system in order to eliminate wasteful printing and streamline processes and procedures.

The Welcome Center workflow is fully automated and designed to work with documents that are faxed, scanned, or emailed. Any document received is routed through a secure server and placed in an initial indexing queue where an associate reviews the document and assigns it to the appropriate work queue (e.g., advising, admissions, residency, financial aid, academic progress). A key responsibility in the overall operation of a high volume center is to ensure adequate staffing for each queue. The Welcome Center has associates assigned to one or more queues each day. During this time, documents are electronically processed and completed.

One benefit of the workflow system is that each queue can be set up with a multitude of functions, including: balance loading (ensures the workload is equally distributed so that everyone is completing similar amounts of work) automated messages sent to the student's account (e.g. "The College has received proof of in-state residency"); procedural checkpoints; and data tracking. The use of pre-set procedural guidelines ensures that each document is processed consistently. In fact, a procedural "checklist" for each document can be implemented so that each step must be initialed (via electronic signature) by the staff member before the document can be considered complete. Not only does this mechanism ensure consistency in processes and procedures, but it also aides in the training process for new hires or when a procedural change is implemented.

Data tracking within a workflow system can yield crucial analytics for the institution. This includes the total number of documents received, the average number of documents received per day/week/month, the average processing time per document type, and student traffic patterns. This data ensures that staffing and resources are allocated appropriately given the time of year, and also establishes the need for additional resources – including increased staff or expansion of the current workflow system.

The design of the Welcome Center workflow system involved several key departments, including Financial Aid, Registrar, Admissions, and Information Technology. Collaboration across the institution is key in the initial design and set-up. Many documents are used by more than one department and for more than one reason. Therefore, a holistic design is critical to ensure unnecessary overlap and duplication of staffing resources.

D. Knowledge Database

A knowledge database is another complementary software system that enhances the user's experience. Investing in this type of system provides for more efficient response to inquiries, and provides access to information when students are unable to reach the online support center. The Welcome Center utilized a knowledge database system to provide students with quick and efficient responses to more general informational questions. The knowledge database is housed on the institution's website. Students can ask a question, such as, "When is the tuition payment deadline?" and be directed to a response that also provides a link to more specific information on the website.

The knowledge database, while extremely valuable, takes an initial monetary and time investment, as the institution must populate a database of questions with responses that are personalized to the college. However, once the initial structure of the database has been established, the maintenance of the system is not as time-consuming and can contribute to a more efficient method of information dissemination.

Information regarding how to access the database is available to students in a number of ways. Students were sent the information to their email accounts and it also is available in many areas of the website. One of the most effective methods of informing students about this available tool is via recorded phone messages that students may hear when waiting to speak with a Welcome Center representative. Students may be on hold, hear the message regarding an alternative method of answering their question, and then

utilize the database to find the answer. This allows other callers with more personal needs to move up in the phone queue and be assisted more quickly.

The data available from the knowledge database reporting system also is very valuable. For instance, types of data reported can indicate the most commonly asked questions during any given time period. This provides the institution with focus areas of where to be proactive or where information could be more transparent and accessible to students. Additional sample data may include locations of students (such as other countries) and allows for a more comprehensive overview of who is interested in the college. This can be particularly useful for institutions that are looking to expand their programs, especially in the area of distance education.

E. Appointment System

Implementation of an online appointment system is a value-added service that offers students the convenience of a quick and streamlined process for scheduling necessary appointments with student services professionals. In addition to convenience, an online appointment system drastically reduces the number of student inquiries that involve cancelling, rescheduling, or confirming an appointment. The added benefit of a user-managed system ensures students receive reminders according to their preferences, such as email or text alert. Additionally, calendar notifications within an online appointment system further enhance the user experience.

The design of the appointment system needs to take into consideration the overall functions of the center so that appointment types are created in alignment with staffing roles and responsibilities. In addition, it is best to consult with first-line service providers (e.g., associates) to assess what types of questions typically arise within a given appointment type (e.g., advising, financial aid). This information can be integrated into the appointment description so that students are better equipped to understand the breadth and scope of each appointment type. Furthermore, this level of detail helps establish parameters for the appointment.

In addition to detailing the purpose and outcomes for each appointment type, it is critical to assign a realistic timeframe for each type of appointment. Historical data and feedback from both students (via focus groups or a survey) and first-line service providers about various timeframes (e.g., 15 minutes, 30 minutes, 45 minutes) should be considered in order to establish the best timeframe options for students. The data and feedback collected may impact the initial design of appointment types and lead to the creation of additional types of appointments. For example, if the data suggests that the initial advising appointment length varies for a student who has declared a major or program of study versus a student who is still exploring his/her options, perhaps there is a need for two initial advising appointment types. Alternately, it may be determined that students who are still deciding on a major or program of study need to complete a career exploration appointment before the initial advising appointment. The best solution will depend on institutional structure, as well as student traffic patterns.

IX.   CONCLUSION

Building an online service center that fully addresses the needs of all students, whether they are distance learning or on-campus students, entails full commitment from the institution. The amount of planning and development, from the environmental workspace to the technology systems, is a massive undertaking in itself. The additional resources of staffing and training are the critical pieces that culminate in a successful endeavor. As stated by Hornak, "It will take a cultural shift within institutions to realize the benefits that technology can bring to the services and programs provided to students. Staff already proficient in current technologies may take the lead in restructuring how to share information, engage students, and provide services." [3, p. 82].

Technology has provided the ability to for students to take that first step toward furthering their education right from their own home. This type of model assists all students, not just distance learners, by providing them the flexibility and the accessibility to complete their transactions seamlessly and without frustration as they navigate the online world of learning. This seemingly simple request, most notably a requirement

from many accrediting bodies, is very much a complex undertaking that involves numerous layers, structures, and systems. However, once the institution has committed to making this shift, the services provided to students are invaluable to their successful college experience.

X. ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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