Technology Streamlines and Improves Recruitment — and Institutional Performance

JANICE FORSSTROM

Established in 1965, North Shore Community College (NSCC) is one of the oldest and largest of the 15 public comprehensive community colleges in Massachusetts. Operating from campuses in Lynn, Beverly and Danvers, NSCC serves more than 10,000 students each year. One of our strategic directions is to build technology media environments that create a "technological village" — a phrase used by NSCC President Dr. Wayne M. Burton — and to increase communication at all levels of the college.

In 2001, NSCC implemented a robust integrated campus portal integrating e-mail, learning management system, course resource areas and administrative services. This Unified Digital Campus (UDC) built upon SunGard Higher Education Banner ERP and the Luminis Platform, provides portal capabilities, collaboration and communication tools, and a common interface. The UDC has resulted in an integrated environment that facilitates seamless interaction for learning, teaching and administration. The result has been not only a vastly improved online experience but also an opportunity for the college to redesign its business processes.

Currently, the fully integrated portal environment includes self-service applications, a learning management system, course resource areas, content management, intranet with many custom paperless processes, and personal Web space available for all students, faculty and staff. Nearly all use this integrated system. It has also enabled us to follow-up and identify the potential appliants to our institution, including some 35,000 monthly visitors to our Website.

Traditionally, we collected information about 400 to 500 potential students using "recruit cards" gathered during high school visits, a very old fashioned, inefficient and ineffective process. Now we collect 3,000 to 4,000 "online recruit cards" in the same amount of time (or less), with no additional staffing. Since implementing this system, we have seen steady growth in our enrollments; our 2006 and subsequently 2007 fall credit enrollment were the largest ever — moving North Shore from the 5th largest to the 4th largest institution in our system.

Our e-recruitment application has resulted in increased communication with potential applicants, timely interventions and follow-ups, and increased constituent contact — all using an existing system that required no additional staffing or expense. To be more user friendly, we abandoned the tradition of grouping programs by academic division; instead, a new categorization system mixed programs from various divisions, integrating noncredit with credit offerings. The project, which took a year of collaboration, has resulted in a dynamic online environment that reflects how students think, not how NSCC thinks organizationally. Another successful initiative has been an On-the-Spot Events (OTSE) program and Early Acceptance events. The program has four key components:

• It allows our recruiters to hand out letters of acceptance during high school visits.

• It provides an electronic communications plan for area high school guidance counselors that encourages them to promote On-the-Spot Events for students who would normally be our clients, but are often admitted much later in the process.

• It enables concurrent processing of fall and spring applications in our service area, a change that reflects our shifting institutional demographics and the growing number of traditional-age applicants.

• A series of Early Acceptance events for students and their families promotes more information, better connections, and fosters future relationships.

As a result of our OTSE program, our acceptance numbers are higher and we have better information earlier on our first-time/full-time student cohort for retention. By accepting students earlier, we are able to develop better advising options to counsel them much sooner and more thoroughly on academics and finances before they arrive on campus. As we continue our communications initiatives, we are experimenting with Web 2.0 aspects that students expect from us. For example, the college consciously decided to maintain an institutional MySpace page to provide direct links to our homepage services and to counter the informal NSCC MySpace community that had developed on its own. This decision was pursued carefully and thoughtfully to inform our constituents with correct information concerning the college — and also to reach out to students where they communicate, not just where we think they should be in the online world.

Our future projects include integrating a prospect portal and further advising enhancements for retention. Shifting our paradigm from what *we* consider best to what our *potential and current students* expect began with our implementation of an integrated campus portal. We feel this culture change positions us well with our stakeholders, and not only provides improved customer relationship management, but also demonstrates the results in measurable institutional performance.

Janice Forsstrom is vice president for administration and finance at North Shore Community College. E-mail: jforsstr@northshore.edu