Transforming Student Services

The U. of Minnesota takes a fresh look at client/institution interaction

by Robert B. Kvavik and Michael N. Handberg

Transformations take many shapes. They can be structural or functional, subtle or dramatic with major or minor impact on institutions. They can be radical and revolutionary occurring rapidly in response to external pressures for change or they can be evolutionary and stable. They can be driven from within the organization with broad participation and expectations for change by the membership or they can be driven by a few individuals, often from the top down, with varying levels of resistance to change. They can be comprehensive or narrow; occur with great fanfare or quietly. With transformations, anything is possible.

The student services transformations at the University of Minnesota are affecting both structures and functions in rapid, dramatic, and comprehensive ways with major impact and consequences for the university. Staff participation is gradual and incremental, but student participation is enormous and growing. The public response to and acceptance of the transformations have been overwhelmingly positive.

Two transformations in student services are especially noteworthy and represent a sea change in how student service units support the university community. First, student services are undergoing a fundamental change moving beyond the traditional responsibilities of maintaining student records, financial aid administration, and student advocacy. They are becoming more tightly linked with the institution’s strategic academic and economic objectives.

Student services professionals, in partnership with academic officers, are emphasizing higher value activities such as student retention and graduation rates, enrollment management, resource management, revenue generation, academic planning, marketing, and performance assessment; both for students and the institution. Consequently their internal value to the institution increases as they shift from a public utility role to strategic contributors to the management and growth of the university’s instructional programs.

Second, centralized, producer-oriented services are giving way to decentralized learner-oriented services. This shift includes numerous opportunities for self-help as well as access to information and services on the part of students and faculty; and with that comes greater local authority and responsibility. Of the two transformations, this change is the most radical.

Services are being provided electronically—at any time from any place—and without the intermediation of student services staff. And student service professionals are becoming generalists who serve as facilitators and navigators in an information-rich environment that is shared by provider and client alike. In such an environment, the existing organizational structure and ways of doing business are subject to increasing scrutiny and are under enormous pressure to change.

Context for Change

At many universities, if not most, student service units are classic models of Weberian bureaucracy. They are rule-oriented as is demonstrated by their publications, financial aid handbooks, and college catalogues that elaborate endless procedures and processes for determining eligibility for access to programs and resources. Decisions are made via a system of formal and informal application of laws. Within each unit roles are hierarchical and highly specialized. Official business is conducted on the basis of written documents that are founded on laws and policies of state and federal governments or boards of trustees. Staff and students interact in the context of approved forms, rule books, and written transaction records.

In fairness to these student service units, all have had a major impact on equitably distributing resources and access to opportunities in higher education. Today, however, they are often perceived as slow and unwieldy, inflexible and poorly coordinated, inefficient and costly. In worst-case scenarios, these units act with different values, perspectives, and information—sometimes with negative consequences for students. They are viewed by some as territorial, enlisting allies as needed. Rivalries and personalities are obstacles to coordination and joint policy making even with such minor matters as setting event deadlines. For example, financial aid deadlines sometimes contradict admissions and registration deadlines and vice versa.

Michael Dolence and Donald Norris argue persuasively in their book, Transforming Higher Education (Society for College and University Planning, 1995), for the need to transform the sector’s institutions to learner-oriented service providers. For them, the rule-oriented, bureaucratic decision-making process must give way to informed judgment with ability to self-inform and self-correct. Instead of provider-driven services being offered at a set time and place, they must offer student- and faculty-driven services. Self-help and decentralization of information, services, authority, and responsibility are key.

One of Dolence and Norris’ most powerful insights is their recasting of productivity. They argue that cost savings, downsizing/rightsizing, and restructuring all miss the point. Enhancing productivity is the end...
Turning Our Thinking Upside Down

These are the ways student transactions are completed: automatically, self-initiated, by means of a generalist, or with the assistance of a highly trained specialist. The left triangle, representing our old system, suggests that the vast majority of the transactions require help from student service specialists. The challenge is to build awareness of this reality.

Norris, is the expectation that student service units add value to the institution's larger goal of timely and accurate, and outputs rather than outputs that add value. Can the process of registering for courses also be a process for generating and maximizing revenue for the institution (especially tuition), and retaining and graduating students? The challenge is to build awareness of this reality.

We also realize we should be more aggressive about using the transactional data and the processes that generate these data (for example, grade reports and faculty course assignments) in ways that add value. Can the process of registering for courses be a process for assessing performance (such as time to completion) and for planning one's academic programs? Can the process of reporting grades and assigning faculty to courses simultaneously generate information on instructional productivity and demand? Can we acknowledge the role of the admissions director, registrar, financial aid director, bursar, and their staff as key players in facilitating strategic academic decisions?

The University of Minnesota's student services units have been under enormous pressure for the last three years. As with most American universities operating mainframe legacy systems to support student administration, our programs were not year 2000 compliant and had to be fixed or replaced. Also, several years ago the legislature mandated a change from the quarter calendar to the semester calendar. Those changes would be hard to accomplish with existing built-in-house programs because they would have to be rewritten with arcane codes and poor documentation. And, to make matters worse, their clientele—students, staff, and faculty—did not respect these student support units. One survey, to our surprise, indicated that students pro- gressed from freshman to senior year, their dissatisfaction increased. It seems that adjusting to the bureaucracy got even more frustrating and complicated as students neared graduation.

University of Minnesota colleges have employed nine different grading systems (we're down to just three today), one of which awarded an F+ to students. "We can only surmise that the F+ recognized "failure with distinction." Some of our college bulletins dedicate the first one-third of their pages to rules rather than to course and program descriptions. As lengthy as these bulletins are, these publications represent a condensed version of the full set of rules found in the financial aid handbook and the registration bulletin. The publishing costs are enormous. Students, for the time of registration to the time of graduation, have to go through hundreds of pounds of bulletins and guides as reference materials. Because there are no one-stop registration centers and because both academic units and central support service units want to regulate the registration process, an unfortu- nate student can walk several miles and cross the Mississippi River numerous times to complete registration—assuming everything goes right.

Developing a New Vision

It doesn't take a rocket scientist to realize the old system no longer served the needs and expectations of our students and staff and that dramatic changes were needed. We began by shifting admissions, financial aid, and registration to the office of the senior vice president for academic affairs, assigning new personnel to manage these units, and radically simplifying policies. The bursar's office was merged with the financial aid office to create a new center for student financial services. PricewaterhouseCoopers helped us formulate a new vision, which is being constantly refined, to simplify and optimize our systems. The five-point plan is summarized here.

1) STUDENT TRANSACTIONS

Student service units manage an enormous number of transactions. Hundreds of thousands of grades are reported and recorded, thousands of students are registered, several hundred million dollars of tuition and fees are collected, and an even larger amount of financial aid is awarded annually. Many of these trans- actions are done manually, on paper, at fixed times, and at fixed locations.

Fully 75 to 90 percent of all transactions currently done manually and on paper should be done electronically and without the intervention of an adminis- trator. Moreover, these transactions should be strategically aligned to mini- mize turnaround. For example, dropping a course should automatically and simul- taneously adjust financial aid and credit a student account as well as notify a stu- dent of the academic and financial con- sequences of his or her decision.

Similarly, there are too few transac- tions that can be initiated directly by the student. The student must go to the appropriate office and complete a trans- action assisted by a staff member. More egregious is not being able to complete these services at a single location and at a single time but rather having to go to several locations, often with return visits, in order to complete a transaction or cert- ification. Many of these processes can be redesigned so students can self-initiate most transactions and com- plete them with greater accuracy, in a timely fashion, and when and where it is convenient. These transactions must be either highly automated or self-initiated by the client via the Web (Figure 1).

2) SELF-CERTIFICATION

A large percentage of student transactions require certification. Stu- dents are certified as admissible to col- leges and majors and eligible for courses, financial aid, and graduation. We can create an environment that permits greater opportunities for self-certification! The University of California, Berkeley, for example, permits students to enter their
Our vision for student services involves a major change in the way the university interacts with clients.

**Old Way Service Level Determined by Service Professional**

- **Personal Experience**
  - Direct interaction
  - Limited accessibility
  - Solved

- **Service Counter**
  - Staff
  - Manual

**New Way Service Level Determined by Web Site Quality**

- **Service Professional**
  - **Personal Experience**
  - Direct interaction
  - Limited accessibility
  - Solved

- **Customer**
  - Staff
  - Manual

**Out with the Old**

By transforming student services, we can become much more client focused.

**Old Way**

- Students wait in line
- Access from any computer on the Internet
- Access to all campus resources
- Open 24 hours a day, 5 days a week
- Electronic: no paper

**New Way**

- Access from any computer on the Internet
- Access to all campus resources
- Open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week
- Electronic: no paper

**Implementing the Vision**

There will be many impacts from this transformation. For example, with the course planner and guide students can access information on the background, interests, and achievements of their classmates. The potential is enormous, limited only by our imagination. That was the good news. The bad news was the immense increase in the scope of the work we had undertaken and a lack of sufficient resources. As a consequence the university looked for assistance from the private sector. In December 1997 the university and IBM announced an agreement to develop a software product to support innovative advising and business processes that promised to change further how student services are provided at universities. Now completed and in use, the product of the partnership makes it possible for students, parents, faculty, and staff to plan, assess performance, and make smart, productive decisions that will further student and institutional goals and objectives. Web sites are user able to make decisions and take action in ways previously unimaginabled with significant savings in time and increased productivity (Figure 4). Most remarkable of these is a game changer: the cost savings from automated resource management tools for students, faculty, and staff. Clearly the old model service of course change the way service is provided not only the necessary productivity and customer satisfaction. They will not perform deans and department chairs to manage instructional and human resources fully. Nor do they permit the quick and easy solution of the many questions—not unlike the performance tools in products such as Quicker. Administration can match faculty and course resources to student demand. Faculty can assess, in advance, the academic capability and interests of their students. Finally the portal provides a capacity to market programs and outcomes book sales and loans.

**Build A Portal**

Concomitant with building an automatic and electronic registration system was building software tools to facilitate program planning and assessment by the student. The potential is enormous, limited only by our imagination. That was the good news. The bad news was the immense increase in the scope of the work we had undertaken and a lack of sufficient resources. As a consequence the university looked for assistance from the private sector. In December 1997 the university and IBM announced an agreement to develop a software product to support innovative advising and business processes that promised to change further how student services are provided at universities. Now completed and in use, the product of the partnership makes it possible for students, parents, faculty, and staff to plan, assess performance, and make smart, productive decisions that will further student and institutional goals and objectives. Web sites are user able to make decisions and take action in ways previously unimaginabled with significant savings in time and increased productivity (Figure 4). Most remarkable of these is a game changer: the cost savings from automated resource management tools for students, faculty, and staff. Clearly the old model service of course change the way service is provided not only the necessary productivity and customer satisfaction. They will not perform deans and department chairs to manage instructional and human resources fully. Nor do they permit the quick and easy solution of the many questions—not unlike the performance tools in products such as Quicker. Administration can match faculty and course resources to student demand. Faculty can assess, in advance, the academic capability and interests of their students. Finally the portal provides a capacity to market programs and outcomes book sales and loans.

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The staffing requirements shift in the new system. Today generalists or specialists serve as a guide, to extract and source of information and, with software and technology, but also in the organization of the administrator.

New Professional Roles
A practical consequence is the need to train advisors for roles in this new environment. Rather than serve behind a counter, they must redirect their efforts to the design and maintenance of the Web site (Figure 6). Among the new roles we have envisioned under this model are information technology professionals, content/service area professionals, Web communications professionals, and high-level customer process professionals.

Information technology professionals navigate the plethora of emerging Internet technologies and decide which are of value in our environment. Their decisions inform the university's Internet-based technology strategy. In addition, the information technology (IT) professionals write code, manage data, and guide the entire team. IT professionals also help the team understand what the new technology will allow them to do and what constraints it may impose on the system.

Content service professionals know the details of the various functional areas served by the system, including admissions, financial aid, bursar, and registra- tion. Content service professionals ensure that the team's applications meet the core business needs of the offices and institution. We have not eliminated the specialists in this system. Rather, their energy is directed toward system design and performance instead of one-on-one counseling.

Web communications professionals set and maintain user interface standards for the entire site. Institutions do a disservice by displaying information differently from page to page within the same Web site. The Web communication professional makes sure the site is consistent and user friendly.

High-level customer process professionals integrate the services of the different back-end offices so the site and the processes it serves effectively transcend its various parts. Rather than a sequential set of actions that moves the client through registering, securing financial aid, and paying tuition and fees, the client is able—through the vision and effort of the high-level customer process professional—to engage the various discrete tasks simultaneously. Transitions, planning, and performance assessment are now all part of the process. Customer process professionals work with all involved units to bring ideas and creativity together into a coherent design.

End users must test the site and validate the system. We must include end users in the design process as well as usability testing for a successful implementation. Our experience suggests that it is never too early to bring this most important client group into the process.

Technology Requirements
The technology requirements of the new system can be daunting. They include both the central infrastructure to run the system and the equipment needed locally by users who access the new on-line services. To date, the university has wired the majority of its dorm rooms, developed a robust modern pool, and built a network of computer labs throughout campus. In addition, the university will require all students to own or have ready access to a computer. The mainframe systems have been replaced by a distributed-computing system to support the PeopleSoft systems that serve as the Web back end.

Transforming student services must be driven by a vision and it must have the active support of the institution's senior leadership. The institution must substantially reengineer processes and simplify policies. It must be prepared to invest substantial financial resources in new technologies and its staff. An enormous training effort is required because the transformation is, for all practical pur- poses, a change in institutional culture. There must be a communications plan that tells the many components together, clarifies the goals and implementation requirements, and supports the changes through the institution.

Implementing this transformation is daunting but doable. If colleges and universities are to remain viable and competitive in the next decade, such transforma- tion will be necessary. 

Source

Robert E. Knorr (rknoor@uds.umn.edu) is professor of political science and associate vice president and executive officer at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis. Michael Handberg (michael.n.handberg@us.pwcglobal.com) is a principal consultant with Price- waterhouseCoopers specializing in the area of e-business and e-student services.

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