

A Perfect Fit: Pulling It All Together
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Abstract

A Design and Implementation of a One-Stop Shop

Blinn College in Brenham was faced with the challenge of developing and implementing a process to help eliminate the student run-around during busy times of the year, as well as combining some of the student services and business services functions for student success. The administration decided to concentrate on the idea of how to achieve the goal of providing our students with a more convenient, time-friendly process for the day-to-day functions students need.

The idea grew from the consideration of renovating a older residence hall into an administration building to erecting a completely new building with student services and some business services departments located under one roof, to include in the new building a newly designed department called Enrollment Services, which would allow the majority of students to visit one location for their enrollment needs.

To implement the new Enrollment Services department four Student Information Specialists were employed in January of 2002 to begin formal training for four months. With compliments from students, parents, and administration/faculty, the staff is performing numerous functions successfully in the new building to include: campus information; testing registration/payment; transcript requests; student ID/ parking permits; advising appointments on interactive calendar with counseling office; admissions paperwork; housing applications, payments and meal plans; drop/add of courses; enrollment verifications; payment of all charges of tuition, fees, parking and library charges, and installment plan costs; financial aid information; book vouchers; computer access to our online registration and information system; and will call/payment for on-campus theater/band/community performances.

The main goal is to provide students with a technology friendly, service-oriented atmosphere for enrollment functions and other student related business functions, so that their learning experiences are not only in the classroom, but are included in their entire experience at Blinn College.

Introduction of the Organization

Blinn College provides educational experiences and opportunities to assist students in developing intellectually and socially. The institution is aware of the changing educational requirements of the state and will meet the needs of the students as changes occur. The home campus is in Brenham, Texas and serves a thirteen county service area with campuses in Bryan and Schulenburg, Texas. The Brenham Campus is a residential campus housing 1,100+ students on campus and another 1,300 commuter students each semester. Blinn students are encouraged to participate in religious, music, literary, speech, dramatics, journalism, civic, social, academic, and athletic activities. Some of the advantages of attending Blinn College are the low cost of an education, the number of programs available, immediate leadership development, and a seamless transition to a four-year university.

Statement of the Problem

The Brenham Campus of Blinn College, with campuses also in Bryan and Schulenburg, Texas, was faced with the challenge of developing and implementing a student services process to eliminate the student run-around during registration, while also increasing the efficiency when providing student services and business services on a day to day basis to help students be successful. The campus enrollment averages 2,300 students per semester.

The primary purpose of the organizational change was to design and implement a new student friendly one-stop shop counter, as well as to incorporate the offices of admissions, financial aid, business, counseling, recruiting, housing, and student services in one building instead of the traditional three historical sites the campus had known for the previous 50 years. And from correcting the student run-around problem, a secondary problem was predicted to surface and also need administrative attention. This problem was associated with the creation of the new department of Enrollment Services, the integration of Enrollment Services into the new Student Services division, and the

leadership needed to effectively promote and incorporate all employees into accepting the new role of the department as a part of a team effort in providing services to students.

Design

In January of 1998, administration decided to concentrate on the idea of how to achieve the goal of providing students a more convenient, time-friendly process for accessing student services and business services during their time at Blinn College. The services or functions involved were admissions/records, financial aid, housing, counseling/advising, cashiering, and parking permit/identification card access. The ideas involved renovating an existing residence hall and use it as a “one-stop” building for most student services and related business services. A floor plan of the building constructed in 1906 was studied. It was determined that the departments would all have adequate space available, but little room for future expansion due to anticipated enrollment growth. During this time the college also hired a consultant to analyze and study how departments currently functioned and how to make the transition into a student services building. The consultant organized focus groups and individual interviews with each staff member involved. A comprehensive report was written by the consultant concerning steps needed for this transition.

Over a nine-month period of time, the idea evolved into a building which houses 90% of the student services departments under one roof. A newly designed department called Enrollment Services has been developed and allows the majority of students to only visit one location for their enrollment needs. At this time the administration was aware additional personnel would need to be hired. The employees would be called Student Information Specialists, and preferred to be current employees of Blinn College at the classified pay level. By hiring from within, not only did the employees have Blinn College experience and knowledge, but it also allowed the compensation expenses to be lower than hiring from the external prospective personnel pool.

While the consultant was gathering pertinent information about the employees and working environments, the next step with the construction phase was to involve the executive administration of

the college. After numerous discussions over several months, the recommendation to demolish the residence hall and construct a new building was approved. At this time an architect was hired, and the tedious task of designing a student-oriented building was the next phase of the process. Several directors of the student services team visited other community colleges and universities within the state of Texas, while also extensively researching successful student services facilities across the nation. Several seminars and conferences were attended regarding successes and pitfalls of other institutions student services centers. One-on-one interviews were conducted with directors and vice presidents of innovative programs to collect information. The data gathering phase was quite time-consuming, but well worth the effort in the end.

Once the location and footprint of the building were established, the architect, layout/interior designer, and the Blinn College student services liaison scheduled meetings with each department director for their ideas of layout within their departments and functionality across departments to include the responsibilities of the new Enrollment Services department. This phase continued for about 6 months prior to actual construction. A building contractor was hired, and within 18 months from the date construction began, the staff moved into the Blinn College Administration Building on schedule for fall 2002. There were no formal change orders to the building/interior decorating plans during the construction phase, and cost savings in the amount of over \$500,000 was realized at the conclusion of the project.

The total amount needed to promote the employees into the new department was approximately \$26,000 for the salary increases. Four new positions were created. The employees were promoted from the departments of admissions and the business office. However, each department transferred one position to the new Enrollment Services department without rehiring, because of the amount of functions the new department would perform for them to allow the admissions and business offices to reorganize their duties. The Registrar and Director of Business Services were consulted on the details of the change.

Three of the employees hired for Enrollment Services were promoted from the Admissions Office, while the fourth employee was transferred from the Business Services area. The Admissions Office rehired for two positions, while the other position in Business Services was transferred to another department within the division. The Business Office, as it was known for many years, was no longer performing the same functions. The student-related services of payments for registration costs and fines were moved to Enrollment Services. All other functions were restructured to a back office. The total combined salary increase for all departments was \$60,000.

Although a new building was constructed for the Student Services departments listed above, the Enrollment Services concept was designed to operate in the current location. The plan to eliminate the student-runaround was still in place; however, the actual departments would have been separated for any day-to-day interaction between the departments. Simultaneously, a new telephone system was purchased for Blinn College. This enhancement allowed for voice mail, forwarding of messages, and four-digit calling between campuses, which was not in place before.

There were several electronic system solutions used for the development of the new administration building for the one-stop counter. One of the first computer service requests was to relocate the student parking ticket and library fines to the billing and payment screens, so that all charges were paid in one location instead of spread across three areas. Prior to the change, if students had a parking fine, they had to pay the fine in the housing office, and/or all library fines in the library prior to returning to the Business Office to pay any registration balance. With the approval from the appropriate directors, most money transactions between the student and the college is now located in Enrollment Services. This was a time-friendly change for students and administration, including a more appropriate checks and balance procedure for the accounting offices. This electronic solution did not change any budget figure.

Then we also designed a spreadsheet for the counseling office and Enrollment Services office to use for students registering for the state assessment test. In the past, students had to visit the

counseling office to make the appointment, walk the business office to pay the fee, and then return to the counseling office to confirm the appointment. To eliminate the run-around, we designed the spreadsheet, so the enrollment services staff could collect the fee and add the student to the confirmed list. This spreadsheet is located on a network server used internally at Blinn College. This allows approved offices to view the spreadsheets, but also allowing a secure location for only authorized users to use. This same joint location is used between the housing office and enrollment services for options and payment within the residence halls.

Another electronic solution used to improve the student services process was a calendar program called Office Tracker. To have access to this calendar, each office can either choose to have edit or view access only. The Enrollment Services department has write access for five edit users. This program is used between the Enrollment Services department and the Counseling department to make advising appointments for students. In the past, after all paperwork was submitted to the admissions office, the student had to walk to another building to make an advising appointment. By using Office Tracker, the student can turn in all paperwork in Enrollment Services, and make the advising appointment at the same counter. It is the counselor's responsibility to set the advising appointment calendar in advance. If there are any changes to be made, for example, cancellations, extended time, then the Counseling Office contacts the student. Everyone accesses the same database on the server - so when someone makes a change in the calendar (i.e. shared database) all persons with access to the system can view the change.

The final electronic solution in the development phase of Enrollment Services was to consolidate the information screens in the student information system. This allowed the Student Information Specialists to have access to the pertinent information needed to initially serve a student.

Although the furniture was in the new building budget, the Enrollment Services budget included eleven new computers, three printers, 10 calculators, and a rented copier. These items were needed to effectively open Enrollment Services including the lobby area with two kiosks. These are

used by students to access the student information system, register, and complete the FASFA for financial aid.

Implementation

To implement the new Enrollment Services department four Student Information Specialists were employed in January of 2002 and began formal training for four months. In mid-April 2002 the Enrollment Services department officially opened for business in a temporary location until the building was complete. It was necessary to pilot services of the new department during two summer sessions of smaller enrollment. Any major problems prior to fall registration would be discussed. Student services and business services are operating successfully in the new building. The following is a list of the areas of service we provide our students and the public in Enrollment Services: campus maps and information; Quick TASP (Texas entrance test) registration and payment; transcript requests; student ID and parking permits; advising appointments on interactive calendar with counseling office; admissions paperwork; housing applications and payments to include meal plans; drop/add of courses with payment; enrollment verification forms; payment of all charges with cash, check, or credit cards to include tuition, fees, parking fines, library charges, and installment plan costs; financial aid information; book vouchers; computer access to our online registration and information system; and will call/payment for performance tickets to theater, band, and drama productions.

The main concept to remember when implementing a new department in which new processes are developed and combined into one area is to continuously talk to all parties involved about the change. Blinn College introduced the concept early in the process and allowed the employees of each department to discuss any issues and concerns, as well as formulate new ideas to make the process the most time-friendly for the students.

During the planning stage, the directors of each department drafted a list of questions and processes each area performed in the traditional layout. Then each director was asked to separate

each process or question into three groups (A, B, and C), with the instructions that all A question and $\frac{3}{4}$ of B questions could be answered at the new enrollment services counter. The final portion of B and all of C questions would be answered in the perspective department. This activity worked well for several reasons: the concept was simplified into conceivable pieces, the employees could visualize where the change would be, and each director reviewed the new procedures manual for each step. The key to making this level of change is to communicate with everyone during all phases of the process. There is some resistance in the beginning; however, once the seed of change is planted, the momentum of something new and innovative takes over.

Benefits

A significant lesson learned from Blinn College's perspective is when there is a project of this magnitude, a college administrator should be designated to be the liaison. This individual coordinated the efforts not only for the building, but also with the communication of different levels of staff. There was interaction and communication between the Assistant to the Vice President of Student Services (the liaison) and each person involved in the brainstorming, planning, designing, construction, and moving phases involved in this 3.5 year project. The liaison functioned with a sense of ownership concerning the development of the new building, while also communicating with the public entities involved and Blinn College constituents. The liaison was very conscious of including key persons in the decision-making processes, while also communicating information vertically to the executive level administrators, the "front-line" employees, and laterally across departments and divisions. The daily interaction of managers to establish a team effort and initiate discussions outside of the student services division prior to moving into the building was a pertinent step in creating the atmosphere needed to build the responsiveness to the new concepts within the institution. The newness of the workspace and furniture is still in the air and the team-oriented attitude is established and growing. Because the barriers of physical walls, as well as mental challenges has been eliminated between the departments, employees of different areas have joined

together to form committees to share information. Not only is the building a new home for these departments, but it also creates a synergy effect within the Student Services division. The lines are shorter and the students are satisfied with the service.

Retrospect

The main goal of this endeavor was to provide students with a technology-friendly, service-oriented atmosphere for enrollment functions and other student and student related business functions, so that student learning experiences are not only in the classroom, but are included in their entire experience at Blinn College.

Although the process was tedious and time-consuming over the four year planning through implementation stages, it was all worth the effort to increase student satisfaction, as well as create a team-oriented atmosphere within the division. A new building was constructed, a new department developed, and a new concept of providing student services at Blinn College was established. With all of this behind us, the next step is to nurture the process to continue offering our students quality service and prepare them to succeed in their future.