Moving from SLACC to SLEIC

Improving the Exiting Process
For Students with Financial Indebtedness

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Moving from "SLACC" to "SLEIC"

The Division of Finance and Administration at the Medical University of South Carolina is committed to innovation and the delivery of excellent services. Beginning in 1997, the Division initiated a Continuous Quality Improvement Program (CQI). One of our pilot projects was the redesign of our student loan exit interview process that was plagued with customer service problems. Over the course of many years, this process of exiting students with financial indebtedness, had failed to meet the customer demands resulting from dynamic changes within the University's academic community. The University exits between 500 to 600 students annually.

In the late summer of 1998, a team comprised of a cross–section of university staff, students, and faculty was assembled. This team known as ***"SLEIC"*** *(Student Loan Exit Interview Committee) defined their mission as follows:*

> *"To improve and streamline the student exit interview process in order to ensure compliance with all regulations. This process will be effective and efficient with measurable outcomes and clearly defined responsibilities. The process will contain accurate and timely information, well–defined procedures, and effective communication among all parties."*

The group was trained in the principles and techniques of CQI. By applying these tools and focusing on communication, the team designed and implemented a very effective and efficient solution.

Over the course of 3 ½ years the group took a system lacking a customer connection ***("SLACC")****, and evolved it to a web accessible on-line process available to customers 24 hours a day. With our graduating class of May 2002, all student loan exit interviews were conducted on–line. The true success of this project is measured by the following outcomes:*

- ✓ *In excess of 400 man-hours saved in Student Service departments annually.*
- ✓ *Elimination of significant travel time for students on off–site rotations (approximately 2 to 10 hours per student).*
- ✓ ***Marvelous improvement*** *in communication and rapport between departments, college administrators, student government, and faculty.*
- ✓ *Eliminated unnecessary steps in the university student exit process. Estimated timesaving per student is one to two hours, 500–1000 student hours saved.*
- ✓ *No customer issues with student diploma hold policy, which had escalated the need for redesign.*
- ✓ *Overall survey rating from customers improved significantly to an average of 3.4 on a scale from 1 to 4.*
- ✓ ***Tremendous flexibility*** *for students. Eliminated need for interruptions in rotations and class time. Approximately 70% of our graduating students are on rotation during the exit interview time period.*
- ✓ *Eliminated one temporary FTE in the Student Accounting Department.*

- ✓ *Valued-added workflow improvements in all areas.*
- ✓ *Increase in exit compliance rate from 70% to 99.6%.*

The University is still assessing and refining this process to ensure the delivery of excellent service to our customers.

Organization

The Medical University of South Carolina (MUSC) is a state institution consisting of six colleges offering comprehensive programs in a wide variety of medical disciplines, an academic medical center, and several related organizations. It is located in Charleston, South Carolina. Since 1824, MUSC has served not only the citizens of South Carolina, but also individuals and students throughout the world. The University's mission focuses on education, patient care, and research.

The institution was founded by the Medical Society of South Carolina, a Charleston medical organization, as the Medical College of South Carolina. Through legislation and because of its commitment to support health education, the State took ownership of the school in 1913.

The President of the University is Raymond S. Greenberg, MD, PhD. John C. Sutusky is the Vice President for Finance and Administration and Patrick J. Wamsley, CPA, MPA is the Chief Financial Officer. The student enrollment as of September 2002 was 2,258. The University also utilizes the Datatel Colleague system for student service areas, bursar, and planning.

Initiative

According to federal requirements, all exiting students with financial indebtedness to the federal government must complete an exit interview. Prior to August 1998, students exiting the University had to maneuver through a cumbersome system lacking a customer connection (SLACC). Exit–interviews were in–house sessions that required students to schedule time during a group meeting or make an individual appointment for their interview. This scenario was very difficult for all parties, since approximately 70% of our graduating students are on off-site rotations during the primary exit time of the year. The standard practice consisted of coordination through several offices, many manual steps, continuous follow–up with students, rework due to unreliable data, inadequate communication, and other issues.

The flaws in the system manifested themselves with the 1998 Spring graduating class. It has been the University's policy to withhold a student's diploma if they do not complete the exit requirement. In May 1998, the University followed its diploma hold policy for many students who did not complete the exit process. When this event occurred and regardless of the issues, it was evident that the process had failed for all of its customers, but especially the students. This situation created the need for an immediate overhaul of this process.

Design

In 1997, the Division of Finance and Administration had made a strong commitment to quality and service excellence by launching a continuous quality improvement (CQI) program lead then by Vice President Robert Gallager. The exit interview process became one of two pilot projects. The project began in August 1998

with the organization of a CQI team comprised of stakeholders in this process. The team members consisted of the following:

> students, associate deans, departmental business managers, student coordinators along with staff from the departments of Student Accounting, Financial Aid, Enrollment Services, and Information Technology.

The team selected SLEIC (Student Loan Exit Interview Committee) as the team name with the implication that it communicated the goal of a new "SLEIC" process. To equip the team for its challenge, training was provided in the principles and tools of CQI. The team agreed on a 15-week timeline to complete their initial tasks and to meet at least 90 minutes per week. Team facilitators assisted with the sessions. The team's mission was to improve the student exit interview process in order to ensure compliance with all regulations and to gain effectiveness and efficiencies that were measurable.

The team utilized a CQI methodology known as FOCUS PDCA (**F**ind a process, **O**rganize a team, **C**larify the knowledge, **U**nderstand the causes, **S**elect the process, **P**lan the improvement, **D**o the data collection, **C**heck data collection, and **A**ct to seek additional improvements). Within these steps, the team gathered data related to the problem using brainstorming, flowcharting, benchmarking and cause and effect techniques to clarify and understand the problems. The team focused on both the current and the desired processes. The outcomes from this step were the identification of success requirements for the process, as well as a list of other potential initiatives. Both results were beneficial for the purposes of short and long-term planning. The analysis concluded the need for timely and reliable data, establishment of new codes within the Colleague system, increased quality and quantity of communication, timelines, enhanced IT skills

for both user and technical staff, and support from senior leadership. Even with the new resource requirements, the group believed that with reallocation of current resources the process could move forward with little or no budgetary impact. Although the team was still in the early stages of the effort, they already recognized the benefit of the team effort through the significant improvement in communication between all stakeholders.

The team's next challenge dealt with selecting and planning the new process. During this stage, it was critical to validate the feasibility of implementing the process along with selecting performance measurements. A complete assessment as to the potential success of the new process had to be made. This assessment not only included resource availability, but also the evaluation of the level of support from customers and senior leadership.

In regards to measurement, the team selected student surveys, FTE costs, time studies, and compliance rates. The ultimate goal of this change was to move from the current practice for exit interviews to a web-enabled process available to the students 24/7. Once the team was satisfied that the change in business processes was attainable, it proceeded to plan the improvement by developing a timetable for implementation and assigning responsibilities. The "SLEIC" team agreed on a phased approach. At this point, the team completed its initial charge by presenting its activities and implementation plan to the CQI Steering Committee and the CQI Quality Council. These two groups initially represented the leadership body for the CQI initiative and were comprised of senior leadership and representatives from various departments within the Division of Finance and Administration. The next step was to implement the process.

Implementation

The initial phase focused on new policies and procedures for responsible areas, improved quality and quantity of communication with all stakeholders, specific timelines, and accurate and timely data using new data codes. To accomplish these tasks, a sub–group of the original SLEIC team was formed. Two additional people from the Student Accounting department and an individual skilled in web development joined the group.

The first phase went live with the May 1999 graduating class. The SLEIC sub–group met its communication challenge by developing a communication plan that stressed a repetitive and frequent approach. The steps within the plan focused on the use of e–mails, flyers, University publications, newspapers, posters, contacts with each college's student coordinators, SGA representatives, student orientations, and a new Student Accounting departmental web page. The communications contained consistent, timely, and useful information. Communication issues between the departments supporting this process were solved by the development of rapport and trust, which were outcomes of the initial SLEIC team's efforts. Policies and procedures, responsibilities, and timelines were clearly defined and communicated. The result of this process change was the decline from 50 to 60 students not complying with the exit interview requirement in the previous spring term to less than 10 students. Furthermore, the enhanced communication alleviated any surprises for the students, faculty, or staff. These marked improvements were encouraging, but the SLEIC sub–group remained focused on the primary goal of a web–enabled process.

Over the next 18 months and with the input from customers, evaluation and adjustments to the process continued as the sub–group worked towards an on-line system. The University had in excess of 100 attendance patterns. This degree of complexity

provided many challenges to overcome in meeting customer needs and federal requirements. In December 2000, we began the effort to deliver the process through the web. Together, the SLEIC sub-group designed a relational database to accumulate a number of elements. Throughout the design and testing phases, the sub-group focused on the delivery of an efficient and quality process for all customers. Primary objectives included, ease of use for the student, flexible access, and process efficiency. The system was designed for students to access the system through *MUSC's Name Account System (MNA)* (log–in security) via the web. The information included in the SLEIC system were student information forms, one streaming exit video (18minutes), one streaming MUSC Student Accounting custom video (8 minutes), links to other loan counseling databases, both internal and external, a survey, and e-mail confirmations.

Each student was assigned a code to specify his or her cumulative loan structure. A *MySql* database was selected because of its open architecture, flexibility, and power. Once the student accessed the system through their MNA account, he or she began the process by completing a brief survey. The system routed the students to different databases for them to supply information based on their assigned code. The final step was the viewing of both streaming videos. Implementing the video was the biggest challenge with the web application. *RealOne* was selected as the media and *RealProducer* software was utilized to convert to the streaming video. The streaming capability allowed the student to view the video file quickly without waiting. The videos provided important loan counseling and repayment information. Upon completion of these steps, confirmation e–mails were sent to the student and the Student Accounting department. The system was designed for students to have the ability to go back and

review the informational videos at a later time. Student Accounting received data exported from the database into Excel to complete the exit process. The new SLEIC web process was piloted as an option for students in Spring 2001. The participation rate was 25%, mainly due to the fact that testing was not completed until late March. With full implementation in the Spring of 2002 the participation rate was 99.6%. For students who did not have access to a computer, the Student Accounting department allowed them to use the department's computers.

Benefits

This entire process not only benefited the University in terms of the end results, but it also provided introduction, education, and training in the CQI methodology. The on-going goal of Finance and Administration is to permeate the organization with techniques and knowledge for assessing and redesigning processes. This project was a successful beginning towards meeting this goal. It also highlighted the importance of performance measurement.

To reemphasize the direct benefits and outcomes from implementing these changes is critical to understanding the true added value of this best practice. The results included the elimination of significant travel time for students on off–site rotations. Students spent from two to ten hours of travel time to attend an exit interview. In conjunction with the elimination of travel time, the new system offered tremendous flexibility for students. Approximately 70% of MUSC's graduating students are on rotation during the prime exit interview period. Having the ability to select a time at their convenience is a huge advantage to them. Annually, over 400 man-hours were saved in student service areas and redirected to other needs. Students have also benefited from the

elimination of unnecessary steps in the exit process. This change is best demonstrated by the removal of the requirement to come to a location and attend a lengthy exit session. The estimated time saved per student was 1 to 2 hours. Annually this represents timesavings of 500 to 1000 hours. Another outcome that added tremendous value was the greatly improved communication and rapport developed between departments, college administrators, students, and faculty.

With the workflow improvements, the Student Accounting department, eliminated 1 FTE. Some departments' involvement dropped to a minimum following the implementation of the new process. Compliance with the exit interview process increased from 70% to 99.6%. In addition, the overall satisfaction survey rating for the exit interview process rose significantly to an average of 3.4 on a scale from 1 to 4. Through this redesign, the University eliminated customer issues with the student diploma hold policy. Finally, this best practice was implemented with little or no budgetary impact. All resources existed within the University and the reallocation of these resources was successful.

Retrospect

In the planning phase, the SLEIC team committed to measuring performance consistently, assessing the process, and making any necessary adjustments. From this perspective the issues that could have been improved stemmed from focus and measurement. Staying focused on the main goal and objectives during any implementation can be difficult, especially when the individuals involved are still responsible for their operational duties. During the period of implementation, there were several other changes underway in the Student Accounting department. As a result, the

SLEIC sub-group members' limits were stretched in handling multiple tasks. This lead to the recommendation of dedicating resources to the process in order to expedite the implementation.

A second recommendation was to establish performance indicators, measure and document them consistently, and take action. Following through with these steps in a more timely manner would have resulted in better data for assessment and action. The team gathered data for performance measurement, but it was not always in the most timely and effective manner.

In summary, the customers of this best practice were thrilled with the outcome. They viewed the SLEIC process as both innovative and responsive. Through the success of this process, MUSC laid the foundation for its quality initiative.