

**Harnessing the Power of a “OneCard” System
to Lower Cost and Improve Customer Service**

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Abstract

In the fall of 1998, West Texas A&M University implemented a “OneCard” ID Card Transaction System. This system was implemented in a effort to enhance the students educational and campus life experience by combining various University cards, functions and services into a single ID card – the Buffalo Gold Card. Prior to the “OneCard” system, a student had an ID card, copy card, meal card and a activities punch card. Each semester they were required to obtain validation stickers at various departments on campus. Currently, the Buffalo Gold Card is used as an ID card, a meal card, a library card, a privilege access card, a door access card and a debit card. The “OneCard” transaction system provides 19 academic and non-academic departments with a complete point-of-sale system, privilege and account management for meals, and activity and debit functions along with door access authorization. Many campus departments wanted to improve customer service and the services they offered, while saving time and money for the University and its students. This has been accomplished utilizing the OneCard system. Over the last four years, the Buffalo Gold Card has become the key to campus life at West Texas A&M University for students, faculty and staff. During this same time frame, deposits on cardholder accounts has increased more than five fold, the University has become ticketless for all sporting and extracurricular activities, and the business community of Canyon has bought into the slogan of the Buffalo Gold Card... ”The Way to Pay”.

Introduction

West Texas A&M University (WTAMU), rich in history that dates to 1909, is the northernmost senior institution of higher learning in Texas. As the only bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degree-granting state university within a 100-mile radius, WTAMU's primary service region extends beyond the Texas borders into the neighboring states of Colorado, Kansas, New Mexico and Oklahoma. The University offers 61 undergraduate, 42 graduate and 1 doctoral degree programs within a four college, one school structure. WTAMU is committed to a liberal arts philosophy and strives to provide its students with quality academic experiences enriched by small classes, career-enhancing opportunities and student-oriented faculty. West Texas A&M University is located in the heart of the Texas Panhandle, 12 miles south of Amarillo (population 160,000) in Canyon, a quiet rural community of 13,000. Forty-two buildings, including the first and largest state museum, are located on the 135-acre main campus. Our student enrollment is just above 7000 (82% undergraduate) along with approximately 780 faculty and staff. We also host numerous summer conferences and camps for a variety of programs.

Statement of the Problem

Prior to fall of 1998, the average student had to carry several cards - an official University ID card, a meal card, a copy card and an activities punch card. Enrolled students also had to get a library bar code added to their ID card, a registrar's semester validation sticker, and an activities validation sticker. What we found was that many students did not have an ID card or were not fully validated for a semester until halfway through or later in the semester. Students would show up at the last minute for a term paper and need to use the library or computer lab, but did not have their card or the right validation stickers for the semester. This was an inconvenience to them and caused more last minute work for the various departments. Ultimately, West Texas A&M University wanted to enhance our students' campus experience through the consolidation of various cards, validations and required departmental stops into a single campus wide ID card.

Through a OneCard system we could:

- 1) Enhance the customer service we provide to our students, faculty and staff.
- 2) Make it more convenient for a student to attend the University and access services.
- 3) Improve our current services or add new services for our students, faculty and staff.
- 4) Consolidate services dealing with card production and validation from several departments into one ID Card Office.

And to this end we proceeded.

Design

In 1996, a University steering committee was set up to research and evaluate options for the implementation of an OneCard system as a way of simplifying our students' campus life by combining all campus and departmental cards into one ID card. From that committee, a working committee was formed and tasked with researching OneCard systems, developing an RFP, evaluating the vendors' responses and selecting a system. This committee also formed and chaired various sub-committees across campus to survey and identify potential needs and uses of the new OneCard system. The Focus of these committees was to ensure the involvement of the entire University including Food Service, Fine Arts, Athletics, Student Government, Activities Center, Computer and Telecommunications, Library and the University Police Department. As we proceeded with these committees, we gathered information, ideas and uses for the system and developed a plan to move forward.

Initially, this plan involved three phases. Phase I included development of an ID Card Office and department for ID Card production; point-of-sale (POS) services for the Food Court and Cafeteria; replacement of the meal card, the library barcode sticker and tickets at Athletic events; and access to student voting and to the Activities Center. Phase II included the remaining debit functions such as the University Bookstore, vending services, copy services, laundry services, ticket sales and library fines. Phase III included facilities access such as residence halls, computer labs and academic buildings. After reviewing and considering these three phases, we realized that it would place our students in a "catch twenty-two" situation. Phase I would not provide enough places or options to give them a reason to carry their cards and use them everywhere. Therefore, Phase I and

Phase II were combined to be implemented for Fall of 1998. Combining these two phases provided a wide variety of available services for our students and encouraged them to carry their ID cards on and off campus. Ultimately, our focus was on providing a simple and convenient solution for our students, thereby enhancing their experience at West Texas A&M University.

Implementation

We created a separate ID Card office and department to oversee the implementation and to provide a central point for the University community to contact and rely on for service and support. This department reports to the Director of Budget, Payroll and Reporting and Assistant to the VP of Finance. We felt placement of the OneCard office in this division would facilitate a flexible and progressive card system, allowing independent interaction with other departments and offices thereby ensuring a smooth transition and implementation of our campus card system. In the beginning, the office was comprised of an ID Card administrator and an office assistant. One of our goals was for the OneCard office to be self-sufficient in terms of funding its activities, the replacement of equipment, maintenance and staffing through the development of revenue streams mostly generated by sales and deposits. These revenue streams include a five dollar per semester per student fee, commissions on sales, billing for maintenance and depreciation on equipment used by other departments, lost card and reactivations fees, and the selling of cards and badges to students and departments.

The main computer of the transaction system was installed in January 1998, and physical installation of the infrastructure for the reader network began. A decision was made to implement this over a period of about six months to ensure the readers were in place and the system functioning properly the first time our students used them. We wanted to ensure that our students would not be inconvenienced by a hardware failure. As a precaution, we implemented a policy to allow off-line transactions in the vending, copy and laundry readers just in case there was a communications problem between the reader

and the main computer. This allowed students to make planned purchases without the possibility of being turned down. After a short period of time, the off-line function was discontinued as our confidence in the reliability of the equipment and the entire system grew. From February to August 1998, we installed and configured over one hundred and twenty (120) card readers across campus. These readers included the Bookstore, Food Court POS, Library, Activities Center, Athletics access, vending services, laundry services and copy services. A limited test of the system was performed in July of that year with a full campus-recording event in the Fall 1998. Since then, Phase III has been implemented on a limited basis with three residence halls and four academic buildings and/or departments using the door access capability of the card system. The system has continued to grow in functions and services provided as well as in the dollar amount deposited and spent by our students, faculty and staff. Currently, there are over 130 locations on and off campus where students, faculty and staff can purchase or gain access to goods and services using the ID card.

In the fall of 1999, a departmental copy card function was provided for departments needing copying services from the library for their faculty and/or graduate students. This allowed departments to deposit money onto a card and restrict its use to copy machines and microfilm machines for non-taxable departmental copies.

In the spring of 2001, a new service was established for our cardholders along with a new process for the accounting of sales and the reimbursement of card sales. An off-campus program was implemented to allow businesses in the community to take advantage of our

system to offer students more choices and services than were offered on-campus. We now have twenty-three locations off campus including restaurants, specialty stores, convenience stores, a pharmacy and an automotive shop that accept the ID Card as a form of tender. For fiscal year 2002-2003, our cardholders spent over \$192,000 for goods and services at our community merchants. We also automated journal entries into the general ledger system for sales information and payment of our on and off campus vendors, reducing the man-hours required to process each week's sales information previously calculated and entered by hand. This is done daily through an import file ensuring proper and timely payment to our vendors and departments, providing an overall savings in time and money by the business office and accounting department.

An internet based "Online Gold Card Office" was established for the Fall of 2001. This office gives all cardholders the ability to add money to their Gold Card, check the balance of their card, check the history of all transactions and turn off the card if it becomes lost or stolen. This feature saves both the student and the Gold Card staff time in processing the transactions with real time results. For fiscal year 2003, nearly \$120,000 was added through a web-based transaction to the debit function of the Gold Card.

In the Fall 2002, two additional applications were added to the card: (1) Allowing students to choose to have their emergency book loans and book vouchers placed on their ID cards instead of waiting for checks to be mailed. This proved to be an efficient, convenient and cost-effective way for the students to get their money. Cost savings were seen in man-hours in departments involved in processing institutional loan applications,

requisitions and purchase orders necessary to cut checks for emergency book loans. Man-hours were also saved in the business office and the bookstore bypassing the necessity for students to pick up checks and vouchers. A voucher was presented at the bookstore where a credit entry was made into the bookstore inventory control system and a charge was placed on the student's accounts receivable account by the accounting department. These services are now handled by placing the loan or voucher transaction onto the card to be used immediately. (2) The addition of a dining dollar fund to the regular meal plans allowed students a choice of using part of their meal plans at the food court as well as the cafeteria. The students' dining dollars accounts are restricted for use only at the cafeteria, the Food Court vendors, the Food Court Convenience Store and the Java City counter providing our students with additional choices of places to eat outside the cafeteria.

We now produce Education and Nursing Departments ID badges and photos for students doing observations, student teaching and clinicals off-site. We also provide various departments with individualized departmental ID Badges for their employees, and provide community memberships cards for any community members and their families wanting to use the facilities on campus.

Benefits

From the beginning, we immediately realized the benefits to our students, faculty, staff and departments utilizing the OneCard system. These benefits include, but are not limited to, increased convenience for our students in their day-to-day activities, instant verification of student's enrollment status, and the control and tracking of campus facilities utilization and programs offered by departments across campus. All of this is accomplished through the assignment of various types of privileges and accounts, providing for the access to buildings, events, services and functions by students, faculty, staff and guests of the University. It also provides control and accounting of products, goods, and services sold through the point-of-sale system.

Most of our students' privileges and accounts are setup automatically through the initial import process when they enroll. This means, for the most part, a student is ready to go the minute they are enrolled for a semester. Through the subsequent imports, those privileges and services are removed when a student or staff member leaves the University. Students, parents, faculty and staff appreciate having a one-card-does-all system as indicated by the first year's deposits of \$240,000 to last fiscal year's deposit of \$1,261,876. Since then, each year has had a continual increase in utilization by our students, faculty, staff and departments. In fiscal year 2002-2003, our generated revenues surpassed our OneCard office budget for the first time since the program was started in 1998. As is evident from the above examples, many of our departments have found new and innovative ways to provide better service to our students, faculty and staff while reducing cost and man-hours by harnessing the power of our OneCard system.