

Self-Service Automated Housing Sign-Up at the University of Miami

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Abstract

This year the University of Miami automated the housing sign up process for returning students. The entire sign up process was conducted on the web and spanned over a two week period. The system includes functionality for retaining current rooms, selecting new rooms, holding reservations for friends, viewing room and floor layouts, notifications, completing the financial obligations, etc. This new self-service application replaces a paper-based manual process, eliminating standing in line and saving time and effort for both our students and housing staff. Come and let us tell you about it!

Organization

Founded in 1925 by the founders of Coral Gables who felt an institution of higher learning was needed for the development of their young and growing community, the University of Miami has grown to become one of the largest private research universities in the southeastern United States.

More than 15,000 undergraduate and graduate students from around the world call UM home during the academic semesters. The University has grown from its main location in the City of Coral Gables to include the medical campus located in Downtown Miami, the Rosenstiel School of Marine and Atmospheric Science on Virginia Key, the John J. Koubek Center in Little Havana, the James L. Knight Center in Downtown Miami, and the South and Richmond campuses in southwest Miami-Dade county.

Statement of the Problem

The problem came to light two years ago when our University President, Dr. Shalala, inquired about a long line of students waiting for help in the administrative offices. When told that the students were waiting for help in room sign-up, she asked if perhaps with technology there might not be a better way to do this, and told the housing

office to “fix this”. Students actually waited on line several times, not just once to get their housing setup, adding to the frustration level.

Design

We have a student portal “Easy” to handle student life, self-service tasks and activities. The system is home grown, utilizes Microsoft ASP coding for web presentation and a CA/IDMS legacy database back-end. We already had an established administrative housing system in place as a building block that contained the actual facility and room information. In analyzing the procedure, it was seen to be more complex than initially thought, due to the complexity of the room assignment priority rules. Priority over “room ownership”, rights of first refusal, and personal preferences needed to be carefully addressed to ensure satisfaction with the new procedures. In the “stand-on-line” method, students gathered up their desired roommates and stood together. Converting this into an independent process for each student with web and email communications proved especially challenging. Many “brainstorming” sessions and mock signup sessions were held with students to determine the final process.

Implementation

In implementation, we worked backwards from a deadline date to determine project milestones and staffing needs. Signup for the fall semester rooms are typically done before spring break over a several week process.

The actual signup process for a student was broken down to three steps in a “wizard” presentation style that moves them through the procedure. These are:

- Step 1: Search and select a room; or confirm a pending room reservation made by a friend
- Step 2: Sign the housing contract
- Step 3: Pay housing deposit by credit card

A few weeks before the signup period allowable times for the new single room or change room period were assigned to each student. These signup start times were based on the student's seniority in housing.

Benefits

The benefits of our new system are obvious and were immediately seen. Rather than standing on line, students were able to handle their housing assignments from their rooms at a time of their choosing. The new system also saves housing administrative staff time and effort; they can use their time to help students with special needs or problems.

Mainly, the new system has been a great convenience for the students.

Retrospect

The first time the new system was used, we mimicked the old procedure by spreading the tasks over four weekends. Weekends are deliberately chosen for housing rather than business days / hours so that the student wouldn't have to miss any classes to complete the process. With the ease and acceptance of the new process, this time will be compressed down to two weekends probably, retaining the weekends only method. We also saw where we had our busiest periods, and may tune the assignment of available start times to spread the load out more evenly. Future additions will include a new process to signup freshman and transfers that have not been in University housing before.