

**Creating and Sustaining Superior Customer Service:**

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## **Abstract**

*Today's student demands quality customer service. Rising tuition costs in higher education have made the student-customer a more discriminating individual, requiring colleges and universities to compete to attract and retain quality students. The absence of a service model results in inconsistent service delivery and the perception, whether or not deserved, that quality service is often not a high priority of institutions of higher education.*

*The Office of the Registrar at the University of South Florida has made appropriate usage of technology to enhance the service delivery model. While technology provides an important tool, enhancing service quality and service delivery begins with people. The Office of the Registrar made several changes to reengineer its service model. Unit programs and services are delivered using the latest technological advances to support the overall learning and development of USF students and in response to changing institutional needs. The unit has been strengthened to promote a staff with a strong work ethic, commitment, perspective, and creativity to anticipate customer needs and generally "get it right the first time". Unparalleled volumetric productivity or transaction processing; technical expertise to adapt, modify, enhance, and recreate computer systems and applications to meet university/unit needs; and maintenance of vast amounts of data that are regularly assembled or arranged to illuminate problems, frame options, and offer solutions are our signature services. Unit performance is enhanced by blending ideas, people, and technology and by ensuring that every customer at the least understands and at best experiences a high degree of satisfaction.*

*Below describes the proactive measures undertaken to enhance the service model, with specific focus on service quality and service delivery via people and technology—high touch and high tech.*

**Introduction of the Organization:**

The University of South Florida is a multi-campus national research university system that supports the development of the metropolitan Tampa Bay Region, Florida, and the nation. Since opening for classes in 1960, USF has developed into one of the nation's major public research universities. USF is classified as Doctoral/Research Extensive by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, and is ranked among the top 100 public research universities in the annual report "The Top American Research Universities." The University receives more than \$200 million a year in external funding to support research and development projects. With 42,000 students from all 50 states and 116 countries, USF awards more than 4,650 bachelor's degrees and 1,700 master's degrees annually on campuses in Tampa, St. Petersburg, Sarasota/Manatee, and Lakeland. The University confers more than 160 doctorates in 32 fields and more than 90 Doctor of Medicine degrees a year. In its short history, USF has awarded more than 180,000 degrees.

The University of South Florida is committed to serving the people of Florida and the Tampa Bay Region and is dedicated to excellence in Teaching, Research, Service, and Community Partnerships that build upon unique strengths inherent in Florida's population, location, and natural resources. (Excerpts from Strategic Plan 2002-2007.)

## **Statement (restatement) of the Problem/Initiative**

Registrar's staff are routinely called upon to enforce, interpret, and inform students of university policies, procedures, and practices. Because of the myriad statutes, rules and regulations governing university operations, the Office of the Registrar is often the first source to which students turn for information, assistance, and direction. The Registrar as the gatekeeper has a broad sphere of influence on entering students, enrolled students, and exiting/graduating students. The educational experience students have coupled with the service quality received not only affects recruitment and retention but also student-alumni relations, donations, and university image.

## **Design**

The Office of the Registrar designed and implemented a service template comprised of expanded technology uses and three inter-linking critical components over a six-month period to (re)invigorate staff and increase their understanding and interest in our new customer service paradigm:

1. A Customer Care Document that defines our standard of customer service.
2. An Incident Response Matrix or database used to capture and track significant service incidents.
3. A Power-To-Act list which defines questions or situations whereby the staff are "empowered" or delegated authority to act to respond to customer needs.

These actions were a major step in giving clear indication to the university community and the public in general that quality service is an important priority. Our goals of increased student and staff satisfaction is acknowledged and appreciated.

## **Implementation**

The Implementation Team included the following individuals:

### ***Executive Sponsor:***

*Ms. Angela DeBose, University Registrar*

### ***Other Sponsors:***

*Mr. Anthony Embry, Associate Registrar, Operations*

*Mr. Richard Boyd, Assistant Registrar, Operations*

### ***Implementation Team:***

*Mr. Christopher Cobb, Associate Registrar, Systems*  
*Ms. Eva Christensen, Assistant Registrar, Systems*  
*Mr. James Davis, Client Services Coordinator*  
*Ms. Kristin Brink, Records/Registration Coordinator*  
*Ms. Verna Glenn, Curriculum Coordinator*  
*Ms. Peggy Stanley, File Room Manager*  
*Ms. Beverly Lazenby, Graduation Certifications Manager*

The project involved the components below.

Building the Service Model.

1. Needs Analysis
2. Evaluate Available Resources
3. Determine Use and Allocation of Resources.
4. Communicate
5. Train & Track
6. Post Implementation (Re)Evaluation

Implementing the Service Model.

*What are our needs to provide quality service programs and service delivery?*

- a. **Customer Care Document.** Develop office-wide to regular or routine student questions or concerns to provide students with consistent, understandable, reliable information and allow the staff to project a more confident rather than uncertain or powerless image to customers. Utilize to respond to tree-branch-limb-leaf questions or concerns received through a variety of service platforms (i.e. in-person, telephone, e-mail, and web).
- b. **Technology Uses.** Maximize technology and service delivery platforms and options. Minimize the conflicts caused by outages or downtime. Intervene when system usage is “frustrated”. By-pass and substitute personal assistance to avoid the consequences of strained interactions. Increase staff awareness that ease of access should also accompany a release valve of human interaction in instances when clients cannot make the technology work for themselves.
- c. **Incident Response Matrix.** Treat each complaint as an opportunity to learn something that may aid in changing or correcting negative first impressions. Recurring complaints with a particular person, department or service may be indicative of personnel, systemic problems, or just plain poor service. Track them so you can stop them in their tracks.
- d. **Power to Act.** Delegate duty with training, giving staff greater autonomy to carry out their work. Create an environment conducive to learning, away from the distractions and disruptions of the unit but accessible enough to the unit so that staff do not feel isolated, remote, or out-of-reach. Construct training programs that cover the role of the Registrar’s Office and how it fits into the purpose and governance of the organization. Inform staff of the powers and responsibilities delegated them by the Registrar as well as the appropriate exercise of that power, given legal and ethical considerations which govern their work. Empower staff to make informed decisions

timely, at the point of contact. The result is fewer delays, less frustration, and the ultimate in responsiveness.

### **Benefits**

Implementation of this strategy has allowed the Office of the Registrar to leverage our technological resources to handle routine processing and mundane tasks. A by-product of the increased usage of technology has been the ability to reallocate human resources for problem solving, advising, counseling, etc. to handle situations requiring human interaction and intervention.

The transition at the University of South Florida required four separate but interlinking components: 1) leadership, 2) staff acceptance, 3) training, and 5) follow-up. Each component is critical. One without the other would result in a less than desirable outcome, or at worst, a continuation of the status quo.

Fiscal and personnel constraints may affect the ability of some institutions to completely duplicate the processes used here at The University of South Florida. As Confucius said, "A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step". Do not let lack of desired resources deter you from utilizing what is available now as that first step of that thousand mile journey.

### **Retrospect**

Discuss anything that might have been done differently. (If applicable)