Transforming Student Services

The U. of Minnesota takes a fresh look at client/institution interaction

by Robert B. Kvavik and Michael N. Handberg

Transformations take many shapes. They can be structural or functional, subtle or dramatic with major or minor impact on institutions. They can be radical and revolutionary occurring rapidly in response to external pressures for change or they can be evolutionary and stable. They can be driven from within the organization with broad participation and expectations for change by the membership or they can be driven by a few individuals, often from the top down, with varying levels of resistance to change. They can be comprehensive or narrow, occur with great fanfare or quietly. With transformations, anything is possible.

The student services transformations at the University of Minnesota are affecting both structures and functions in rapid, dramatic, and comprehensive ways with major impact and consequences for the university. Staff participation is gradual and incremental, but student participation is enormous and growing. The public response to and acceptance of the transformations have been overwhelmingly positive.

Two transformations in student services are especially noteworthy and represent a sea change in how student service units support the university community. First, student services are undergoing a fundamental change moving beyond the traditional responsibilities of maintaining student records, financial aid administration, and student advocacy. They are becoming more tightly linked with the institution’s strategic academic and economic objectives.

Student services professionals, in partnership with academic officers, are emphasizing higher value activities such as student retention and graduation rates, enrollment management, resource management, revenue generation, academic planning, marketing, and performance assessment, both for students and the institution. Consequently their internal value to the institution increases as they shift from a public utility role to strategic contributors to the management and growth of the university’s instructional programs.

Second, centralized, producer-oriented services are giving way to decentralized learner-oriented services. This shift includes numerous opportunities for self-help as well as access to information and services on the part of students and faculty, and with that come greater local authority and responsibility. Of the two transformations, this change is the most radical.

Services are being provided electronically—at any time from any place—and without the intermediation of student service staff. And student-service professionals are becoming generalists who serve as facilitators and navigators in an information-rich environment that is shared by provider and client alike. In such an environment, the existing organizational structure and ways of doing business are subject to increasing scrutiny and are under enormous pressure to change.

Context for Change

At many universities, if not most, student service units are classic models of Weberian bureaucracy. They are rule-oriented as is demonstrated by their publications, financial aid handbooks, and college catalogues that elaborate on endless procedures and processes for determining eligibility for access to programs and resources. Decisions are made via a system of formal and impartial application of laws. Within each unit roles are hierarchical and highly specialized. Official business is conducted on the basis of written documents that are founded on laws and policies of state and federal governments or boards of trustees. Staff and students interact in the context of approved forms, rule books, and written transaction records.

In fairness to these student service units, all have had a major impact on equitably distributing resources and access to opportunities in higher education. Today, however, they are often perceived as slow and unwieldy, inflexible and poorly coordinated, inefficient and costly. In worst-case scenarios, these units act with different values, perspectives, and information—sometimes with negative consequences for students. They are viewed by some as territorial, enlisting allies as needed. Rivalries and personal animosities are obstacles to coordination and joint policy making even with such minor matters as setting event deadlines. For example, financial aid deadlines sometimes contradict admissions and registration deadlines and vice versa.

Michael Dolence and Donald Norris argue persuasively in their book, Transforming Higher Education (Society for College and University Planning, 1995), for the need to transform the sector’s institutions to learner-oriented service providers. For them, the rule-oriented, bureaucratic decision-making process must give way to informed judgment with ability to self-inform and self-correct. Instead of provider-driven services being offered at a set time and place, they must offer student- and faculty-driven services. Self-help and decentralization of information, services, authority, and responsibility are key.

One of Dolence and Norris’ most powerful insights is their recasting of productivity. They argue that cost savings, downsizing/rightsizing, and restructuring all miss the point. Enhancing productivity is the end...
game and learner needs must drive productivity. Variety, quality, timeliness, and responsiveness are central aspects of information age productivity. This contrasts with the bureaucratic model of productivity, which is heavily oriented toward processes, procedural accuracy, and outputs rather than outcomes. The unit’s immediate goal—for example, the number of students given the right award—blurs a concern for the institution’s larger goal of timely completion and graduation rates. Financial aid as entitlement conflicts with financial aid as a tool to leverage the composition of an income stream, several hundred million dollars to manage the curriculum and instructional programs—a $700 million annual enterprise. Beyond providing services to students, these units are tied to managing the curriculum and instruction, generating and maximizing revenues for the institution (especially tuition), and retaining and graduating students. The challenge is to build awareness of this reality.

We also realize we should be more aggressive about using the transactional data and the processes that generate these data (for example, grade reports and faculty course assignments) in ways that add value. Can the process of registering for courses also be a process for assessing performance (such as time to completion) and for planning one’s academic program? Can the process of reporting grades and assigning faculty to courses simultaneously generate information on instructional productivity and demand? Can we acknowledge the role of the admissions director, registrar, and bursar? How? We believe our process of financial aid and the processes that generate these data (for example, grade reports and assigning faculty to courses) should be linked strategically to minimize errors. Stu...

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**Figure 1**

**Turning Our Thinking Upside Down**

These are the ways student transactions are completed: automatically, self-initiated, by means of a generalist, or with the assistance of a highly trained specialist. The challenge was turning that triangle on its head.

![Figure 1](http://example.com/figure1.png)

**Old Process**

- Auto Transaction
- Self-help
- Generalist
- Specialist

**New Process**

- Auto Transaction
- Self-help
- Generalist
- Specialist

**Minneapolis’s Makeover**

As we thought about reengineering student service units, a question that became especially clear: are these units and their computer systems fundamental to our instructional programs—a $700 million annual enterprise? Beyond providing services to students, these units are tied to managing the curriculum and instruction, generating and maximizing revenues for the institution (especially tuition), and retaining and graduating students. The challenge is to build awareness of this reality.

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**Figure 2**

**Entangled in Student Services**

University service units must become client-focused and seamless rather than be organized in silos as our old model was.

![Figure 2](http://example.com/figure2.png)

**Delivering Services—The Old Way**

- Site Structure
- Cross-departmental communication
- Shares of paper
- Stacks of paper
- Master indexes of information
- Information which a student requires is dependent on the knowledge of the three line staff

**2) Self-Certification**

A large percentage of student transactions are self-initiated. Students are certified as admissible to colleges and majors and eligible for courses, financial aid, and graduation. We can create an environment that permits greater opportunities for self-certification! The University of California, Berkeley, for example, permits students to enter their...
Simplified Student Services

A Web-based way of delivering services helps students help themselves.

- No silos: integrated, seamless cross-departmental delivery of services
- Accessible from any computer on the Internet
- Eliminates the need for printing and mailing
- Increased accessibility: open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week

Electronic: no paper, easily updated

- One source of information easily found and understood
- Controls the institution’s message to students
- Facilitates change

4) PLANNING AND MANAGEMENT

Until now we have discussed ways to improve how transactions are handled. While these changes and their concomitant cost savings are significant, by themselves they do not fundamentally change the way service is provided nor will they generate the necessary productivity and customer satisfaction. They will not permit deans and department chairs to manage instructional and human resources fully. Nor do they permit the student to control their academic progress and performance. At a minimum, the systems must have three additional capacities: planning, performance assessment, and marketing.

To illustrate the importance of these added capacities, consider an example outside the realm of student services. Several years ago the University of Minnesota purchased software to schedule classrooms that replaced a manual labor-intensive system and reduced costs, eliminated only signing up for courses, but planning a program and assessing performance to date. It is an opportunity to articulate expected outcomes such as academic goals. Increasingly, it is the students who control the timetable, pace, and place of registration. The process is electronic, instantaneous, and more accurate.

5) BUILDING A PORTAL

Concurrent with building an automatic and electronic registration system was building software tools to facilitate program planning and assessment by the student. The potential is enormous, limited only by our imagination. That was the good news. The problem was the immense increase in the scope of the work we had undertaken and a lack of sufficient resources. As a consequence the university looked for assistance from the private sector.

In December 1997 the university and IBM announced an agreement to develop a software product to support innovative advising and business processes that promised to change further how student services are provided at universities. Now completed and in use, the product of the partnership makes it possible for students, parents, faculty, and staff to plan, assess performance, and make smart, productive decisions that will further student control of their academic progress and performance. The minimum, the systems must have three additional capacities: planning, performance assessment, and marketing.

Tools to assess performance are part of the portal strategy as well. Students can assess their academic progress toward their degree or a desired grade point average by asking a host of “what if,” or auditing, questions—not unlike the performance tools in products such as Quicker. Administration can match faculty and course resources to student demand. Faculty can assess, in advance, the academic capability and interests of their students. Finally the portal provides a capacity to market programs and outcomes book sales and loans.

Implementing the Vision

There will be many impacts from this transformation. For example, with the course planner and guide students can access information on the background, interests, and achievements of their own grades in the admissions process. It then reviews only the applications of students that are admitted. A study conducted at the University of Minnesota found that students taking courses without satisfying a prerequisite actually did better than students who had. It seems students will not risk doing poorly in classes for which they are unprepared and that they do better because they want to take the course. Despite such findings, universities place numerous prerequisites on courses because the culture remains highly regulatory and is based on the belief that students will not make good decisions if left to their own devices. This approach to student management is antithetical to the vision we have articulated. Given the right tools, students can manage their own academic progress much more independently of the current advising system.

3) ONE-STOP SHOPPING

Not all activities can be automated and many do require some assistance by trained advisors. Here is the challenge to cross-train staff so they can answer a broader array of questions. This is the genesis of the one-stop shopping concept. The generalist role challenges the current “silo” structure of student service, which fosters decisions by specialists who control functional domains. But delivering student services has become overspecialized. Given the right kind of training and incentives for employers, our staff can answer a broader range of questions. This will result in a more user-friendly environment. Even so, there will always be roles for specialists.

We need to design systems and organizations to provide students, faculty, and staff with greater quantity, quality, and timely access to data. That data should be integrated and support institutional personnel as well as strategic planning and decision making. Service units must help build and support an environment where clients are provided with knowledge and know-how to solve problems. Central administration must promote greater authority to make decisions at the local level. The silo approach, as illustrated in Figure 2, must give way to a problem-solving approach, as seen in Figure 3. In the latter model, the student extracts information from a variety of university units as needed. The problem being solved often transcends in several ways the tasks assigned to the individual units that provide data. First, registration is a seamless process that involves not only registering for classes but also paying tuition and fees and withdrawing financial aid. Second, and perhaps more significant, the registration process is not only signing up for courses, but planning a program and assessing performance to date. It is an opportunity to articulate expected outcomes such as academic goals. Increasingly, it is the students who control the timetable, pace, and place of registration.
Building Efficiency

The staffing requirements shift in the new system.

Our vision permits the student to bypass the desk by going directly to the electronic source of information.