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# Re-engineering the Enrollment Process

*Academic institutions must embrace ways to operate more effectively and efficiently by analyzing their internal processes. The enrollment management function is a good place to start*

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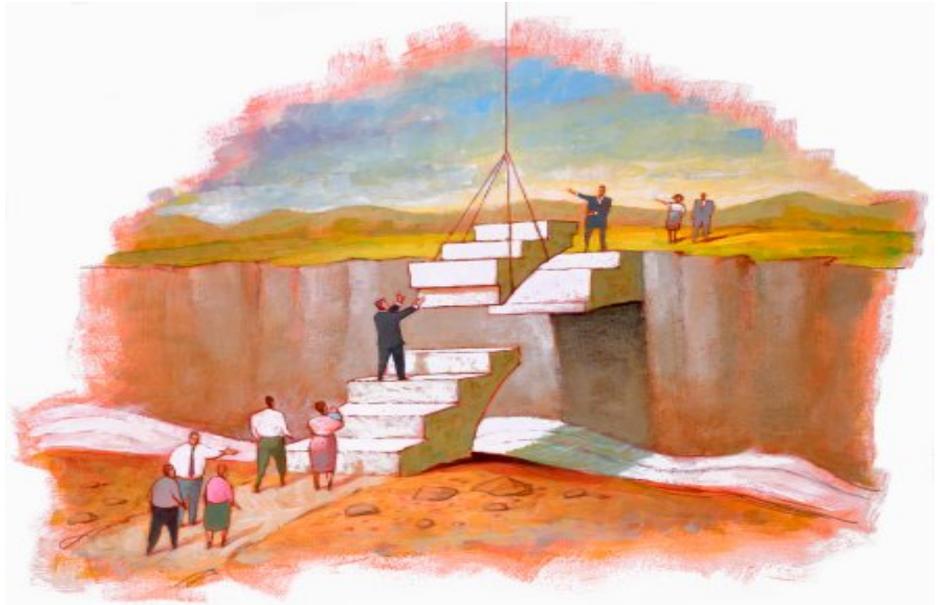
The new reality of aggressive competition has forced institutions to find new ways to recruit, admit, process, and retain students more efficiently and effectively. In addition, rising student expectations have created the need to consistently deliver exemplary customer service. In many cases, administrative processes play a key role in the success of these activities and can be scrutinized to find ways to simplify, eliminate, or reduce the number of steps in a process. Corporations and businesses in the private sector were early adopters of this practice as a result of increasing competition, rising customer requirements, and pressure to enhance profit margins by improving internal efficiencies.

## UNDERSTANDING PROCESSES

Processes drive the creation and delivery of an organization's products and services. More specifically, processes can be viewed as *the way in which work gets done*. In theory, processes are designed to ensure consistency in delivery. More commonly however, processes are left to the individuals involved to interpret, define, and follow.

## THE ORGANIZATION AS A SYSTEM

If asked to describe how their department interacts with other func-



tions in pursuit of the institution's overall mission, most administrators would produce an organization chart. Granted, this does depict their reporting relationships within the institution, but what's typically overlooked is the chart that shows how departments interact to get things done.

Viewing an organization as a system rather than a vertical reporting relationship enables us to see how work actually gets done - *through processes that cut across functional boundaries or silos*. The greatest opportunity for performance improvement lies at those points where a function or task becomes a "handoff" from one department to another. These critical interfaces that often occur in the "white spaces" of a traditional organization

chart, become clearly visible in the process view of an organization. Efficiently managing these cross-functional relationships within key administrative processes can add tremendous value to the improvement of the overall process. In an academic environment, the enrollment management process represents an ideal example of how processes (both internal and cross-functional) can affect the critical delivery of services and the attainment of strategic goals.

## THE ENROLLMENT MANAGEMENT PROCESS

The enrollment management (EM) process plays a major role in the success of an Institution's academic mission. The specific offices involved (Admissions, Registrar, Fi-

nancial Aid, Advising, etc.) must all work together to provide seamless services to students. The internal processes in each of these offices must therefore connect efficiently across department boundaries. Thus, the success of the overall EM process becomes largely dependent upon the success of each of these offices in satisfying the needs of their customers (internal and external). For example, attracting top students can be affected simply by the ability (or lack of) to process acceptance decisions and financial aid in quick succession. Likewise, the Registrar and the Advising Office must work together in a systematic way to provide the necessary student support services, and to manage the registration process. In both cases, an efficiently designed process can ensure that activities that cross departmental boundaries are properly aligned and established to accomplish departmental objectives and to meet institutional goals.

The importance of the EM process therefore makes it a prime candidate for an intuitive analysis and subsequent “re-engineering” effort. Greater efficiencies and tighter coordination between all offices involved ultimately add tremendous value to the attainment of enrollment goals. This can be accomplished by:

- Analyzing current processes to determine where bottlenecks, disconnects, and overall inefficiencies exist
- Modifying these processes accordingly
- Improving communications and cooperation across all departments involved in the enrollment process
- Clarifying staff responsibilities, establishing expectations for

accountability, and developing shared milestones for all departments involved in the process

- Taking full advantage of related technology tools and capabilities

## UNDERSTANDING AND COMMUNICATING HOW A PROCESS WORKS

In order to properly analyze a process, it needs to be documented. A graphical representation provides a clear and easy-to-understand picture that illustrates how steps in a process fit together. This makes it a valuable tool for communicating how processes work and for clearly documenting how a particular job is done. It not only promotes compliance, but also eliminates confusion and clarifies interpretations.

Having a formal method for identifying and integrating processes both within and between departments ensures that the connections, communications, and handoffs among people and systems are well designed and well managed. The most frequently used method for illustrating organizational processes is *swim lane diagrams*, also known as Rummmler-Brache diagrams.

While traditional flowcharts depict processes in a linear fashion, swim lane diagrams visually combine processes and decisions by placing them in *lanes* with one lane for each person or group. Lanes are arranged either horizontally or vertically. Points where process flows “cut across” or change lanes indicate *handoffs* from one person or department to another.

When used to diagram activities that involve more than one department, it clarifies not only the steps and who’s responsible for each, but also where and how delays or mistakes are most likely to occur. More information regarding the use of the Swim Lane technique can be found in *Improving Performance*, by Rummmler and Brache, 1995.

### Step 1: Document Current Processes

Swim Lane diagrams are commonly referred to as business process maps. Unlike flowcharting, process maps illustrate the relationships between departments, people, and processes. By “mapping” the enrollment process across various departments you can clearly see the progression of activities and tasks that make up this critical operation. The resulting diagram (the “as is”) clearly identifies:

- All key process steps
- Interdependencies of processes connecting offices or departments
- Personnel involved each task associated with the processes
- Identification of all documentation flow within these processes
- The existence or absence of documented policies and procedures for key steps or tasks

Any process can be drilled down into a series of sub-processes, depending upon the level of detail desired for the analysis. As a first pass however, process maps should be illustrated at the highest level. If needed, any task or activity in the process can be isolated and reduced into a series of sub-processes or steps in order to analyze it more closely.

In addition to the graphic part of this exercise, individuals engaged in the actual process tasks (known as the “job performers”) should be interviewed to confirm both the accuracy of the diagram and their understanding of the process. Job performers are typically asked a set of standardized questions such as:

- Who initiates this process?
- Under what conditions does this process occur?
- Who is involved in this process?
- What forms or other documents are used in this process?
- What is the end result of this process?
- What are the process boundaries?
- What is the sequence of activities that must be performed to complete this process?
- Does one step trigger another process?
- Where do the inputs come from?
- What is your output?
- Where does your output go?

### **Step 2:** **Evaluate the “As is” situation**

If desired, multiple process maps can be linked together graphically to create a high level overview of the entire process (i.e., from prospect to enrolled student). At this point, analyze the “as is” to find opportunities to merge and streamline processes between departments. Seek improvements that lead to improved quality of service, better throughput and response times, and lower processing costs.

Solicit feedback from current and recent customers of the process (internal and external). The customer experience aids in correlating those intangible factors that impact overall customer satisfac-

tion. Another effective way to evaluate the “as is” process is to bring together a cross-functional team to review and recommend improvements in the process. This team should have:

- Members representative of stakeholders involved in the process
- Expertise in the problem under review
- “Buy-in” from management to support the team’s mission

It’s also helpful to include several of the process job performers in the team review. In this case its important to create an environment that can foster an honest, unbiased critique of the “as is”. This can be accomplished by providing “just in time” training in order to overcome the team’s potential dysfunctions\* such as:

- Trust: vulnerability
- Conflict: passionate debate of ideas
- Commitment: buy-in to the group process
- Accountability: to each other and the team
- Results: defining achievable and noticeable outcomes

(\*taken from *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team* by Patrick Lencioni)

The resulting team analysis should lead to the creation of an improved process design (the “should be”). It’s important for the team to also decide upon appropriate criteria to benchmark and subsequently measure the ongoing performance of the “improved” process. At the conclusion of this effort, team members should be recognized and or rewarded for their participation and commitment to this effort.

### **Step 3:** **Realign Staff and Department Duties**

Redesigning processes typically create new job responsibilities or changes to existing job duties and responsibilities. This is an excellent opportunity to staff the departments involved in the process under review more efficiently by: (1) shifting personnel to areas in need of added support and, (2) creating or eliminating duties in accordance with the requirements of the revised process.

### **Step 4:** **Improve Inter-departmental Communications**

A key objective of process re-engineering is to streamline and improve process activities both within and across department boundaries. Unfortunately the “silo effect” creates barriers to effective collaboration across those departments involved in the enrollment process. Each of the EM departments has it’s own internal processes that collectively contribute to the overall EM effort. Typically these internal processes are unknown outside of its boundaries. Start by educating the job performers. Build communications between departments that clearly define how their operations contribute to the overall process both internally and externally.

When redesigning processes take into account the need to develop mechanisms to promote timely communication within and across departments. For example, operational calendars may be accessible via an Intranet in order to provide shared access to documented critical milestones that affect all departments in the enrollment

process. Because many of these areas impact the other in a variety of different ways, shared milestones become crucial to accomplishing desired outcomes on time.

### **Step 5: Clarify Staff Responsibilities**

Any process, new or old, is only as efficient as the abilities of the job performers involved in the process. In many cases, untrained workers, undocumented work procedures, or a lack of specific skills necessary to perform the task can foster process inefficiencies. One of the most frustrating work experiences is to be part of a team without a clear direction or purpose. People, in the absence of managed performance, will achieve marginal output and most often adapt to the cultural environment. Additionally, job performers tend to establish their own personal benchmarks within the process based upon cultural norms and personal values. Managing people is not easy, but not managing them has extreme consequences. Be very clear and specific about responsibilities, job duties, and performance expectations.

### **Step 6: Take Advantage of Technology**

Re-engineering processes also provides an opportunity to identify ways to take greater advantage of technology. Enterprise-wide systems such as Banner, Datatel, Jenzabar, etc. all have unique capabilities that allow for the automation of process related tasks that job performers may currently perform manually. An understanding of the capabilities of the system therefore, is particularly critical. Establish a network with other local

or regional institutions using similar systems in order to share ideas and productivity solutions involving the automation of manual process steps.

### **Step 7: Prepare for Change**

Improving the EM process is not an overnight effort. It requires the involvement of top management. Change must occur within departments characterized by distinctly different group characteristics, personalities, and employee motivations. The prevailing culture within these areas will therefore have a strong impact upon the success of the change effort. It will impact both the amount of change possible, and the rate at which it can occur.

A successful process change should therefore begin with a compelling argument that clearly defines the need for this change. This information forms the basis of a “change statement” which should include management’s vision for the future of enrollment management at the institution. Understanding the need for change helps set the stage for acceptance and buy-in. This message should be disseminated in a variety of different ways in order to draw attention to the importance and urgency for change.

When initiating the change process, start with small changes. Embrace the success of these changes, and build upon these accomplishments by moving forward gradually with more change.

### **Step 8: Institutionalize the Process Improvement Activity**

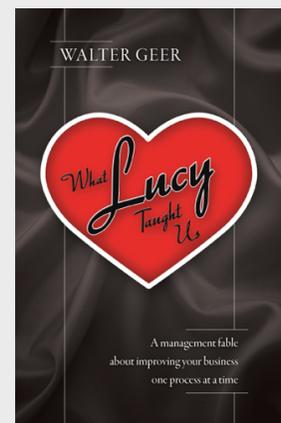
Process evaluation and improve-

ment is a continuous effort. Thus, it should become a part of your institutional culture. Sustain the “change movement” by identifying and assigning responsibility for this effort to continue on an on-going basis. Develop mechanisms to identify other key administrative areas for analysis and improvements.

## **CONCLUSION**

Academic institutions must embrace ways to operate more effectively and efficiently by analyzing their internal processes to find ways to simplify, eliminate, combine, or reduce the number of steps in a process. Failure to do so will jeopardize their long-range ability to accommodate expected growth, compete with their peers to attract and retain talented students, and to provide exemplary customer service.

*To obtain more information regarding the tools and techniques discussed in this article read “**What Lucy Taught Us: Improving your business one process at a time**” by CAG co-author, Walter Geer*



Available on Amazon.com  
(A limited number of promotional copies are available. Please contact the author.)

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