

Managing Change

By Kathy Fitzgerald

Like many small comprehensive colleges, The Sage Colleges had sustained itself on a solid reputation in the community and strong operational leadership. Change was slow and although it was clear, there were many programs and services, which required re-engineering, historical precedent and inertia stood in the way of growth and sustainability.

Internally seen by the community as “complicated,” Sage operates as an independent, comprehensive university (Master’s II) comprised of three independent, degree-granting Colleges: Russell Sage College in Troy, NY, Sage Graduate School, and Sage College of Albany, originally established as a co-ed division in 1949. With the formal Sage College of Albany created in 2000 by merging Sage Junior College of Albany and Sage Evening College.

Russell Sage College (RSC) is a four-year, comprehensive college for women. Sage College of Albany (SCA) is an undergraduate college of applied studies and Sage Graduate School offers a range of master’s degrees, certificates of study and one professional doctorate (with two more in the New York State Education Department (NYSED) approval process).

Several challenges added to a disconnect among the three entities including financial and operational challenges in providing continuity of service on campuses in two urban cities divided by the Hudson River.

From a student services perspective in particular, the college was at a distinct competitive disadvantage. Faculty, staff and students struggled with inconsistencies in policy, complicated processes, and anecdotal procedures. Management was skeptical of reporting due to a perceived lack of data integrity, and planning suffered without access to solid research or reliable analysis of historical trends. Students stood in registration lines that wrapped around the buildings and there were no online registration or advising tools, which are standard at most universities today.

Managing change was the greatest challenge for the institution until Sage engaged Charles J. Loew, President of Maset LLC and his associates to launch a process mapping initiative that would address the most central services to student registration. Based on Motorola’s formal Cross-Functional Process Mapping methodologies, Sage engaged in an 18-month-long journey that delivered Cycle Time Reduction -- shortening the entire registration process, while delivering improved accuracy, efficiency and satisfaction.

Registration, for the purposes of this initiative, was defined from the point of depositing an enrollment fee through advising, transcript evaluation, course registration, and grade receipt, and up to the point of re-registering for the following year. Thirty-five Sage representatives, including front-line student service reps., admission directors, faculty members, financial aid specialists, administrative assistants and deans committed to the process. Initial expectations included: move to an online registration process and advising tools; streamline and increase consistency of registration processes, decrease student frustration, improve inter-departmental and student communication and improved data integrity.

The first weeklong mapping session covered the “As Is” portion of Sage’s existing processes. Four long walls filled with a painstakingly laid out “map” of scenarios a student might take through the process were flagged with nearly 500 “issues/challenges/inefficiencies” that detracted from a positive student experience. From this list, 48 Action Items were identified and each of the hundreds of issues was attached to the most appropriate solution/action item.

A second weeklong meeting mapped out Sage as it "Should Be". This "Should Be" map became the locus of change for the next 18 months. A Presidential mandate solidified the College's commitment and empowered the Mapping Team.

Empowered and informed, each member of the mapping team took at least one action item and established sub-teams of up to six members. Recommendations came back to the general group and once endorsed, were implemented. Monthly one-day meetings monitored progress and broke down barriers as they were encountered.

The results were staggering. In the course of 18-months, measurable and dramatic change included student-oriented improvements such as the launch of online registration, to the publishing of a first-ever multi-year schedule. Rapid advances were also made in transcript evaluation at the point of admission, online advising tools and grading, and availability of e-commerce for everything from enrollment deposits to parking permits.

A sustained cultural change is reflected in the way challenges are now viewed at Sage. The "way we have always done it" no longer suffices. Employees at the entry level challenge historical precedent and are empowered and encouraged to recommend improvements. Starting with admission, importation of inquiry names, SATs and applications has saved more than 1,000 hours in the annual process, ensuring a more efficient response to student requests. Transfer credits are now entered for all students at the point of admission improving the quality of advising, increasing yield, and facilitating students through the registration process. An automated "wait list management system" has increased efficiency and parity of student access to high interest classes and superfluous signatures from several offices have been paired down based on "need to approve" or simply "need to know."

Today, Sage has an entirely new spoken nomenclature and a swift and nimble approach to problem solving. Issues that have stood in the way of improving student service are mapped, barriers are identified, and recommendations for the way it "Should Be" are quantified.

Two additional follow on projects have been started using the same methodology and the Sage Colleges expect them to be equally as successful.

Change has become the norm.

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